

*Samson Raphael Hirsch*

**The  
Nineteen  
Letters**



# THE NINETEEN LETTERS

BY SAMSON RAPHAEL HIRSCH

This famous work, patterned after the "dialogue" method used by Yehuda Halevi in his "*Kuzari*," contains a fiery defense of traditional Torah Judaism against the onslaughts of "modern, rational agnosticism." In the form of an imaginary correspondence between a young rabbi and philosopher, Naphtali, and a youthful intellectual, Benjamin, Hirsch presents the broad outlines of his *Weltanschauung*, and the need for full and uncompromising dominion of Torah over any kind of *Derech Eretz*, or temporal circumstance.

*Samson Raphael Hirsch* (1808-88), rabbi, statesman and philosopher, was a rare phenomenon in Jewish history. His particular significance lies in the fact that he has been, and still is, a beacon of light in the spiritual confusion that followed the political emancipation of the Jews, which created great religious problems most of which are still with us. Whether we turn to Hirsch as a Bible commentator who has a most original way of expounding the eternal message of the Torah, or as an educationist who founded the first orthodox Jewish Secondary School in Europe, as a statesman who while a member of the Moravian Parliament delivered immortal orations on the meaning of human freedom and the dignity of man, or whether we look at him as a philosopher of Jewish Law who by his system of symbolism started a new school in the elucidation of the spirit of our observances, we shall always find in him a great historic personality who shaped and influenced Jewish history by reviving the past, and preparing for the future.

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THE  
NINETEEN  
LETTERS





אגרות צפון

THE  
NINETEEN LETTERS  
ON JUDAISM

by

RABBI SAMSON RAPHAEL HIRSCH  
(Ben Uziel)

prepared by

Jacob Breuer

in a new edition

based on the translation by

Rabbi Dr. Bernard Drachman

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גלוי וידוע לפניך שלא לבבדי עשיתי ולא לכבוד  
בית אבא אלא לכבודך שלא ירבו מחלוקת בישראל

*"Before Thee it is revealed and known that not for  
my glory or the glory of my father's house have I done  
this, but for Thy glory that discord may not increase  
in Israel."* — MEGILLAH, p. 3



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## INTRODUCTION\*

The first decades of the 19th Century reeled under the impact of the young French Revolution. The political upheaval which followed in its wake was accompanied by a profound re-evaluation of the cultural and spiritual precepts prevalent heretofore. The new Liberalism unleashed the forces of Capitalism; science and research proclaimed the human mind to be the final authority; individualism and humanism relegated religion to be on an equal footing with the secular in life.

Simultaneously, under the impact of these new forces, the walls of the Ghetto began to break down. Until then, most of its inhabitants had taken little part in the cultural life of the outside world. The influx of the revolutionary ideas found many unprepared. The result was spiritual chaos of the first magnitude. Concepts which had shaped Jewish thinking for untold centuries fell by the wayside. Many paid homage to a watered down Christian-Protestant Church religion by outright baptism. Others chose to baptize Judaism rather than themselves. Old Synagogues were transformed into modern temples, German prayers took the place of the Jewish Tefilla, the traditional Drasha gave way to the timely sermon, church bells and organs invaded the sanctity of the Bet Haknesset—in short, Judaism was brought "up-to-date." And these acts of aggression were labeled, not treason or revolt, but — Reform of Judaism.

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NOTE: While it may be assumed that the Jewish literary public is familiar with the headlines of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch's life and accomplishment, a brief recapitulation of the man and his work, with special emphasis on the "Nineteen Letters," seems entirely in place.

## THE NINETEEN LETTERS

One of the chief centers of the Reform was the German city of Hamburg where Samson Raphael Hirsch was born in 1808. In his early youth he witnessed the activities of the Reformers and the desperate efforts of the Torah-true ranks (later called "orthodox Jews" by their opponents) to combat the danger. This, more than anything else, fostered his early determination to wage the ceaseless fight for the exposition and supremacy of Torah. He was fortunate to come under the influence of the great Talmudic scholar, Hakham Bernays, who symbolized the new type of spiritual leader in Israel by virtue of his profound Torah learning combined with a deep knowledge of modern philosophy and literature. He left a powerful and lasting impact on his great disciple.

In 1828, Hirsch left Hamburg to continue his talmudical studies at the Yeshiva of the great Rabbi Jacob Ettlinger in Mannheim from whom he subsequently received his Rabbinical diploma. His pre-eminence in Torah, Talmud and Codes was soon recognized and, after completing his secular studies at the University of Bonn, he was called in 1830 to the post of Chief Rabbi of Oldenburg left vacant by Rabbi Nathan Adler, also a disciple of Hakham Bernays, who was called to London. The Jewish community of Oldenburg mirrored the confusion and ignorance prevalent in the minds of the contemporary generation which substituted the idea of a wrongly conceived emancipation for the truth of historical Judaism. Hirsch was not discouraged by this situation. He was convinced that ignorance of Torah was the real source of the confusion which led to reformist aspirations. This, then, became the essence of his life's work: to combat this ignorance of Torah by



re-introducing his generation, especially the youth, to the old yet eternally new way of Torah-life, guided by a thorough knowledge and understanding of the principles and details of the Jewish Law. To this end, he dedicated the first of his epoch-making works, "Horeb, Essays on Israel's Duties in the Diaspora" (1838) addressed to "Israel's thinking young men and women." However, in order to convince his reluctant publisher that there was a public for this new kind of literature, Hirsch wrote a concise and equally epoch-making book "Nineteen Letters on Judaism" (1836) in which he raised all the burning questions which confronted the younger generation of German Jewry. Its electrifying effect quickly paved the way for the publication of "Horeb." In the same year (1838) he published "First Communications from Naphtali's Correspondence," a sharply polemical book against those leaders of Reform whose purpose was the establishment of a new "Wissenschaft des Judentums" (Science of Judaism) designed to reform Judaism by means of a modern exegesis of its literary sources.

In 1841 he assumed the office of the "Land Rabbinate of the Hanoverian Districts of Aurich and Osnabrueck" and moved to his new place of residence, Emden. Here he continued his fight against Reform, and here, for the first time, he formulated the principle which was to become the rallying call for Torah-true Jews everywhere: *Torah im Derekh Eretz*, the supremacy of Torah over whatever circumstance happens to be the order of the day.

In 1846, Samson Raphael Hirsch, having emerged as a Torah leader of world-renown, accepted the Chief Rabbinate of the province of Moravia (of the Austrian Empire)

with Nikolsburg, made famous by such Torah greats as the Maharal of Prague and Rabbi Mordecai Banet, as central community. He was received with great hopes by Nikolsburg's "old school" as well as by the "maskilim" (the enlightened) each of whom expected the author of the "Nineteen Letters" and "Horeb" to reconcile the tension between the two camps. It was a difficult position. While Hirsch emerged in favor of Emancipation which he viewed as a gift of Providence that should provide the Jewish people with inalienable rights and a broader opportunity of observing the Torah, he also saw it as a trial of his people in Galut and pointed incessantly to the concrete danger of assimilation in the wake of Emancipation.

In Nikolsburg, Hirsch maintained a Yeshiva to which students flocked from all parts of the province. His teachings followed the principle laid down first in the "Nineteen Letters:" "To understand Judaism and Torah "out of themselves," and to utilize the general sciences as auxiliary studies for the understanding of Torah."

While each of Nikolsburg's warring factions claimed their Rabbi as their own advocate, he emerged as the universally acclaimed leader in the fight for equal rights for the enslaved Jews of Austria and Hungary. He became their vigorous spokesman as a member of the Austrian Parliament where his fiery language and brilliant rhetoric so impressed the political leaders that Jewish Emancipation and equality before the law became a recognized state of affairs. Yet Hirsch knew only too well that the future of his people depended not on its political status but on its spiritual power as centralized in its Kehillot and Yeshivot. With the true vision of a genius, he sensed the need for his

work on new fronts. It is only in the light of this realization that we perceive the nature of "the most heroic deed of his life" in resigning from his high office as Chief Rabbi of Moravia and accepting a call to Frankfurt by a mere handful of men desperately clinging to Torah in the face of Reform's greatest triumph.

The religious decline of Frankfurt's Jewish community in the first half of the 19th Century is truly amazing. The city of Rabbi Isaiah Horovitz (the author of "Haflaah"), the birthplace of the Hatam Sofer, had fallen victim to the Reform movement. The "enlightened" founded a Jewish school, the "Philantropin," conspicuous for its Reform tendencies. Orthodox institutions were systematically discriminated against and ultimately abolished. Things deteriorated to the extent that it became a rarity to find a young man in Frankfurt who still put on Tefillin. The sacred act of Brit Milah was attacked as a barbaric rite; public instruction in Torah was forbidden; Mikvaot were wrecked and sealed up; Shekhita was prohibited.

Then came the uprising of 1848 which brought the first ray of hope to the few courageous men who still clung tenaciously to the precepts of Torah living. Eleven men received permission from the city administration to organize a private religious society (Religionsgesellschaft) with a in the framework of the community. In a bold move, and without much hope for success, they turned to the famed Moravian Chief Rabbi, head of an entire network of Kehillot, member of Parliament, and offered him the obscure position of Rabbi in a small private society. Unexpectedly, to the consternation and against the vigorous protests of his constituents, Hirsch accepted the offer which he en-

visioned as a Divine call to an historic mission.

Samson Raphael Hirsch took over his new post in August of 1851 and immediately plunged into the work of building an exemplary Torah society which came to serve as a model and inspiration to similarly minded communities throughout the Jewish world. The challenge was indeed enormous. Against opposition from all sides, he began by founding the school which was to bear his name, both elementary and secondary. "There is no hurry for a new Synagogue," he wrote. "First we need a school to build up a new generation of knowledgeable and loyal Jews to whom Judaism is their life's purpose."

He knew that the orthodox institutions had to be equipped in an esthetic manner in order to obtain the respect and recognition of the outside world. Consequently, the school building became the most modern of its kind; a beautiful new Synagogue edifice was erected. The men's choir was introduced to enhance the beauty of the Divine service. Shekhita and Mikveh were restored to their rightful place of dignity. And the Kehilla grew in astonishing proportions. Its immediate impact on German Jewry resulted in the founding of similar autonomy-aspiring orthodox communities in various cities (Mainz, Darmstadt, Berlin, a.o.) creating the entity subsequently known as "German-Jewish Orthodoxy."

After his arrival in Frankfurt, Rabbi Hirsch resumed his literary work which was to continue until the end of his life. In 1854 he founded "Jeschurun," "a Monthly for the inculcation of the spirit of Judaism and of Jewish life in home, community and school." In this organ, which he personally edited until 1870, Hirsch published hun-

dreds of essays and articles containing his views on Torah and Judaism (many of which were later gathered in the six volumes of "Collected Writings"). In 1867 Hirsch began the publication of his monumental creation, "Commentary on the Pentateuch," which appeared, book by book, until it was completed in 1878. It was followed by the famed "Commentary on the Psalms" (1882) and by the "Commentary on the Siddur" which was published posthumously in 1906.

A great proportion of Hirsch's energy was devoted to the fight for the principle of absolute autonomy of the Orthodox Community and the separation of its members from the local Jewish community which had deserted Torah-Judaism. At that time, the Government made it obligatory for the Jewish citizen to belong to a recognized Jewish community. To Hirsch it was unthinkable, and a basic violation of his whole spiritual structure of independent Torah-life, that his Kehilla, or for that matter, any Kehilla which submits unconditionally to the supremacy of the Torah Law, should rise within the framework of a Jewish community dedicated to the Reform of Judaism, or, at best, tolerant of orthodox aspirations in its midst. Almost from the first moment of his arrival in Frankfurt, Hirsch fought tenaciously for the principle of complete religious independence. His ultimate triumph came in 1876 when the Prussian Parliament passed the Law of Secession ("Austritt") which guaranteed the full independence of orthodox Kehillot from Reform congregations.

Two years before his death, in 1886, Hirsch founded the "Free Union for the Interests of Orthodox Judaism" (Freie Vereinigung fuer die Interessen des Orthodoxen Juden-

tums"), dedicated to the fulfillment of the religious and spiritual roles of world orthodoxy and the ultimate union of all orthodox Jews of the world. This organization exerted an increasingly powerful influence over the German-Jewish intelligentsia and eventually became the blueprint of organized orthodox Jewry throughout the world.

Samson Raphael Hirsch died on the 27th of Tebeth 5649 (1888). He was one of the great Torah leaders sent by Divine Providence at a time of deep crisis. As a true revolutionary, in the highest sense, he solved the unbearable tension between the Torah and the new era which had dawned over the Jews of Western Europe. Our generation is confronted by similar problems in new clothing. More than ever, World Orthodoxy and Jewry beyond are in need of the guidance and teaching of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch.



The reader of the "Nineteen Letters" as well as of the subsequent works of Samson Raphael Hirsch is struck by the revolutionary character of the approach. None has more brilliantly defined the revolutionary aspect of the Hirschian view of Judaism and life than the late Dr. Isaac Breuer in his classic article "Samson Raphael Hirsch as a Guide to Jewish History" from which the following is an extensive excerpt:

"Every great historical personality is a revolutionary personality. As a result of his historical mission, he usually finds himself in strong conflict with his contemporaries. The more significant his mission, the greater is the conflict which continues to rage among the descendants until his

mission is completed. What used to be revolutionary becomes an accomplished fact, a matter of course. Yet a revolution within the Jewish people develops differently than that of any other nation.

Every revolution among the nations of the world represents a violation of the law. The law of the nations is not an eternal law but the product of the attitude of an era to the manner of human relationship. Opinions change rapidly. It is impossible to revise the existing law as quickly as opinions change. Gradually a cleavage will arise between the ever changing opinions and the existing law. If something is not done in time to bridge this cleavage or erase it completely by an appropriate change of the law, tension will mount steadily between the law as it exists and the law as it should be in accordance with the prevailing opinions, until there occurs a sudden and explosive change of law.

The law of the Jewish nation is not the sum total of popular opinion on human relationship, but the sum total of Divine rule governing the life of the Jewish society. Just as there can be no revolution against the laws of nature, so there can be no revolution against the Torah. For Jewish history is the history of the people of God's word and any form of revolt becomes a violation of the law which neither circumstances nor changing opinions could ever legalize. Thus the question arises: How can the Jewish people produce revolutionaries who will not immediately be branded by the history of God's word as violators of the law?

The Jewish people has had its share of revolutionaries from the days of Jerobeam I until Geiger and Philipson.

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Jewish history remembers them as violators of the law, as traitors who lead many to similar treason. Does Jewish history also know legitimate revolutionaries?

It knows them. They are the select historical personalities whom God has chosen as forceful exponents of the history of the Torah. Yet the revolutionaries of Jewish history work differently than the revolutionaries of the nations of the world.

Whenever the circumstances of human relationship undergo significant changes in the course of time, the revolutionaries of the nations turn against the law that no longer conforms with the "new" circumstances, break it with an iron fist and replace it with a new law.

The revolutionaries of the Torah-true nation do not turn against God's law. They turn against the circumstances. Whenever the circumstances in the life of the Jewish society change so profoundly that they threaten to jeopardize the all-embracing rulership of the Torah, "legitimate" revolutionaries appear on the historical scene to solve the tension between God's word and the "new" circumstances, not by revolt against the Torah, but by seizing the new circumstances and proclaiming over them, in complete contrast to the prevailing opinions, the absolute rulership of the Torah. They then proceed to remodel and reform, or, if necessary, to destroy and rebuild these circumstances until they conform with the demands of the Torah and supply new nourishment for the eternally flaming fire of God.

The new circumstances, created by the aging 18th century and the young 19th century and crystallized by the French Revolution in the form of individual law, hu-



manism and liberty, were opposed to, and endangered, the Word of God. Jewish thinking sees in the individual not a gift but a challenge; humanity not as a goal but as a stepping stone to the lofty idea of the service of God. Capitalism, once it becomes life's chief motivation, is considered by Judaism pure idolatry. Science, propelled by human intellect, becomes a means to achieve the domination of man over the earth; but certainly it cannot be considered the final source of truth.

The old Rabbis, too, felt this conflict keenly. They did not hesitate for a moment to forego the material advantages of the emancipation which could only be obtained by abandoning the Torah. Steadfastly they clung not only to the Torah but, with the tenacity of desperation, attempted to preserve the old, rapidly changing circumstances which century-old work had brought in complete conformity with the demands of the Torah. Unwittingly they increased the tension between the Torah and the irresistible forces of the new circumstances to a point where the layman began to identify the Torah with the old circumstances and considered the gradual disappearance of the latter as a sign of the decrepitude of the Torah. At this crucial moment Samson Raphael Hirsch appeared on the scene as a legitimate revolutionary of the word of God.

While the Rabbis of the old days saw in the newly developing circumstances only their temporary contradiction to the Torah, and clung defiantly to the wreckage of the old circumstances, Hirsch accomplished the historic leap into New Land, to help the old unchanged Torah to rule over the new circumstances.

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He was strictly opposed to compromise or reconciliation, or even a synthesis: he demanded full and uncompromising rulership of the Torah. The Torah cannot endure co-rulership, far less tolerate it. He invaded the new era with the weapons of the Torah, analyzed and dissected it down to its last ingredients, and then shaped and re-formed it until it could be placed at the feet of the Torah, as new nourishment for the Divine fire. The proclamation of the rulership of the Torah over the new era was the historic achievement of Hirsch's life for his own contemporaries.

With the moving eloquence of his rhetoric and the mighty strokes of his pen, Hirsch expounded the profound truth that the Torah must not be allowed to find its goal, and thereby its limitation, in the houses of learning; rather must it be brought into an intimate relationship with the prevailing conditions of life. The Torah is immortal, unchangeable, permanent, eternally itself — *Derekh Eretz* is shifting, temporary, eternally changing its colors. Yet Torah im *Derekh Eretz* is certainly not Hirsch's invention. He was not the first to create a relationship between Torah and the prevailing *Derekh Eretz*. He was revolutionary in that he cleared the formidable barrier of century-old habit which could think of Torah only in connection with a certain form of *Derekh Eretz*. With the vision of a genius, he liberated the Torah from the deathly entanglement of a decaying *Derekh Eretz* and accepted the new actual *Derekh Eretz* only after it was brought under the complete control of the Torah. Hirsch's views are presented with a convincing logic, an uncompromising forthrightness that should serve to preclude any misunder-

standing as to the real meaning of his revolutionary act.”  
(End of excerpt.)

With all the fiery fervor which motivated his life, Hirsch never lost sight of the objective: to conduct his research into all aspects of Judaism with the same inductive procedure which resulted in the scientific accomplishments of the time. He recognized that the methods used by most of the medieval philosophers suffered from the compulsive attempt to bridge the gap between Judaism and systems of thinking originating outside of Jewish concepts.

Thus, in order to narrow the supposed gap between Torah and the precepts of philosophy one had, for example, to find common denominators for the Greek philosophy of Plato and Aristotle, as available from the beclouded sources of Arabic writers, and the precepts of the Oral and Written Torah. This method of combining two supposedly “equal truths,” each accepted as being unequivocally true, was also applied in the realm of the natural sciences where natural laws and phenomena were explained by means of accepted and often willfully established theories.

Coming in the wake of science’s abandoning of the “a priori” construction in the realm of natural law, Hirsch demanded the same approach for the Jewish religious philosophy. His system of research is best expressed in his own words: “Two revelations lie before you, Nature and Torah. For both there is but one method of research. As in nature you perceive its phenomena as a chain of facts and attempt to probe their laws and inner contacts in retrospective examination . . . so it is with the science

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of Torah which to us is as factual as heaven and earth . . ."  
(From the appended note to the Eighteenth Letter).

True to this method, Hirsch, in his "Nineteen Letters," used the form of an imaginary correspondence between a young Jewish intellectual, Benjamin, whose religious doubts are cleared up in a series of eighteen brilliant essays by a young Rabbi, Naphtali. No issue is shirked, no words are minced when he lets Benjamin cry out in the first letter, containing his complaint: "What bliss is offered by Judaism to its adherents? . . . Slavery, misery, contempt is their lot . . . All enjoyments are interdicted . . . and the law itself! It enjoins isolation, which creates suspicion and distrust; it degrades the mind, so that the Jew bears contempt with equanimity; it is opposed to the cultivation of the arts; its tenets obstruct the way to free speculation. Its study distorts the mind, encourages subtleties and scrutiny of paltry topics . . ."

A formidable attack. Doubly poignant in its youthful bitterness.

The answers come, patient at first and soothing, after the initial excitement, but then growing in intensity of spirit. "Let us try to *know* that which we desire to measure for Judaism, in its history and teachings . . . for Judaism Its study distorts the mind, encourages subtleties and scrutiny of paltry topics . . ."

"Israel, history, mankind, the world — they all can only be comprehended through God . . . all was created by the word of God, determined by His will, formed by His finger . . . His word prevails in every Law . . . God's creature and servant is every being around us . . ." (Third Letter)

And Man? "The law to which all powers submit unconsciously and involuntarily, to it you shall also subordinate yourself, but consciously and out of your own free will . . . "Knowledge and Freedom," these words indicate at once the sublime mission and the lofty privilege of man." (Fourth Letter)

"From God alone, source of *all* might, does man derive his *right* to take his world for his own use. But with this right comes also the duty to appropriate only the permitted and to use it in strict accordance with the will of the Giver. "Good" should be fore him only that which agrees with the Divine will; "evil" only that which stands in opposition to these principles . . ." (Fifth Letter)

And Israel? "Men had eliminated God from life, even from nature, and found the basis of life in possessions and its aim in enjoyment . . . it became necessary that a people be introduced into the ranks of the nations which, through its history and life, should declare God the sole creative cause of existence, fulfillment of His will the only aim of life . . . such a mission imposed upon this people the duty of separation, of ethical and spiritual isolation . . . until, refined and purified by its teachings and example, universal humanity might turn to God and acknowledge in Him the only Creator and Ruler . . ." (Seventh Letter)

The Jewish State? "Israel was obliged to leave the happy soil which had seduced it from its allegiance to God. Nothing should be saved except the soul of its existence, the Torah . . . Destruction and misfortune are no less instructive for Israel than prosperity . . . improvement and correction were the chief purposes of the Galuth . . ." (Ninth Letter)

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In the ensuing five letters there follows a concise outline, subsequently elaborated upon in great detail in "Horeb," of the fundamental principles of Torah, divided into "Teachings, Judgments and Statutes" (Torot, Mishpatim and Chukkim), "Commandments and Religious Duties" (Mitzvot), "Symbols of Word and Deed" (Edot), "Divine Service" (Avodah).

On Emancipation? "We must become Jews, Jews in the true sense of the word imbued with the spirit of the law, accepting it as the fountain of life, spiritual and ethical. Then Judaism will gladly welcome emancipation as affording a greater opportunity for the fulfillment of its task ..." (Tenth Letter)

The final letters contain Hirsch's evaluation of the Reform and the blueprint for the fight against its spread, culminating in the demand; "Schools for Jews!" And this prophetic vision: "It will be different in Israel. Our time leads inevitably to such a change... Posterity will rejoice in the infant that will struggle out into light and life... its name: "Self comprehending Judaism"... " (Eighteenth Letter).

Thus, in a few pages, Hirsch embodied the essence of his world view and teachings, his system of Biblical exegesis, and his method of argumentation for the purpose of re-establishing Torah in its rightful place in the life of his people. If we consider that this book was Hirsch's first major work, written at an age when most men first begin to formulate their ideas, and that it represents the basic structure of his ideology from which he never deviated in all the works to follow, we sense with profound admiration,

even awe, the creative thinking of a universal mind, a true leader of his people.

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The historic significance of the work of Samson Raphael Hirsch and its impact on our contemporary generation is vividly reflected by the growing clamor for the translation of his vast literary output in the two leading languages spoken by world Jewry, Hebrew and English. In addition to a number of anthologies in English, "Fundamentals of Judaism," "Timeless Torah," "Judaism Eternal" and selected writings in Hebrew ("Horeb," "The Nineteen Letters," a. o.), a major part of the majestic "Commentary on the Torah" has been published in English and is currently being prepared for its Hebrew edition. Awaiting their English publication in the near future are completed manuscripts of Hirsch's "Horeb," "Commentary to the Psalms" (Tehillim), and "Commentary to the Prayers" (Siddur).

More than sixty years have passed since Rabbi Dr. Bernard Drachman of New York published the English edition of the "Nineteen Letters" in a translation which has in itself become a classic. Long out of print, the need for a new edition focused attention on the profound changes half a century has made in literary style, definition of terminologies, sentence construction, a. o. Thus, while the present edition is largely based on the original Drachman translation, its style has been adapted to the thinking of the contemporary reader. Here and there, repetitious passages in the original text have been tightened and shortened to help the reader maintain the thread of continuity.

## *THE NINETEEN LETTERS*

It is sincerely hoped that the necessary revisions will serve to enhance the impact of this classic work on the mind of the present and future generation, especially the youth.

The undersigned wishes to record his indebtedness to Miss Gertrude Hirschler for her invaluable assistance in preparing this edition.

*Jacob Breuer*

New York City  
Tishri 5720



THE  
NINETEEN  
LETTERS



## *First Letter*

### COMPLAINT

**M**Y DEAR NAPHTALI:

When, recently, we met again after many years of separation you did not imagine what interest the subject of our conversation had for me. You found me so changed in my religious views and practices that, despite your usual tolerance, you could not help asking "Since when?" and "Why?" I answered you with a whole series of accusations against Judaism, based upon my reading and contact with the world since I had left home and my parents.

You listened quietly and then you said, "Do you really think you understand the subject which you are attacking? Have you tried, by honest and earnest investigation, to acquire a real understanding of the most sacred and important aspect of our lives?" You pointed to the only sources of my own knowledge; the mechanical practice of parental customs, a few fragments of the Bible and Talmud taught me in an old-fashioned *Cheder*, the writings of certain Christian authors and reformers, and, in general, a view of life based upon a suppression of the inner voice of conscience in favor of the demands of superficial pleasure and comfort.

I was forced to admit the gaps in my knowledge. I asked you for instruction. Then the coachman called and you had only time to call out to me "I will write." My dear Naph-tali, while you have thus made me distrustful of my own views, you have neither refuted them nor given me better ones in their stead.

## THE NINETEEN LETTERS

Every religion, I believe, should bring man nearer to his ultimate goal. What else can this goal be than the attainment of happiness and perfection? But to what happiness does Judaism bring its adherents? From time immemorial misery and slavery have been their lot. They were always either misunderstood or despised by the other nations. While the rest of mankind climbed to the summit of culture, prosperity and wealth, the Jewish people remained poor in everything that makes human beings great and noble, and that beautifies and dignifies our lives.

The Law itself prohibits all enjoyment. It is a constant hindrance to the enjoyment of life. For two thousand years we have been tossed about, driven from the paths of happiness. And as for perfection — what culture, what conquests have Jews wrought compared to those of the Egyptians, Phoenicians, Greeks, Romans, Italians, French, English or Germans?

Robbed of all the characteristics of nationhood, we are, nevertheless, deemed a nation, and every one of us, by his very birth, is doomed to form a link in this endless chain of misery. It is the Law that is chiefly responsible for all this. It enforces our isolation and thereby arouses suspicion and hostility on the part of others. It invites contempt by its stress on humble submissiveness. It discourages the pursuit of the formative arts. Its dogmas bar the way to free thought. Through this enforced isolation, the Law removes every incentive to achievement in the sciences and arts.

And what about our own Jewish lore? It perverts the mind by cramming it with petty subtleties until it becomes incapable of producing simple and straight thoughts and opinions. Thus, I have always wondered how you, who

have sampled the beauty of the works of Virgil, Tasso, Shakespeare, and penetrated the ideas of Leibnitz and Kant, can find pleasure in the crude and tasteless writings of the Old Testament, or in the illogical arguments of the Talmud. And what effect does this Law have on our emotional life? The broad principles of universal morality are narrowed into anxious worry about insignificant trifles. Nothing is taught except to fear God. Every petty detail of life is referred to God. Life becomes a continuous round of monastic service, nothing but prayers and ceremonies. Study the book which is put into our hands as the "Path of Life".<sup>1</sup> What else does it teach except praying and fasting and the keeping of holidays? Where is there one word about the busy, active life around us? Why, it is absolutely impossible to observe these laws, for they were intended for an entirely different time. What limitation in travel, what embarrassment in our associations with Gentiles, what difficulties in business! Recently I saw a young rabbi who, whenever he travels, in simple-minded piety, contents himself with bread and water. When one visits him at home, one may still find him poring over the folios of the Talmud. He is even seriously concerned about some of the members of his congregation who are so far advanced in their enlightened views that they do not close their places of business on the Sabbath.

What shall become of us, dear Naphtali? I am about to marry, but when I think of the duties of fatherhood that might possibly devolve upon me, I tremble.

Excuse me for having spoken so freely and unreservedly, although I know that you revere all this very much. I suppose you must, as a Rabbi; your position demands it.

## *THE NINETEEN LETTERS*

Still, I am confident that you have so much affection left for me from former days that you will, in your answer, forget your office.

Farewell.

Yours,  
BENJAMIN

## *Second Letter*

### STANDPOINT

**M**Y DEAR BENJAMIN:

The subjects which you put before me in your letter have occupied my own mind since my earliest youth. Reared as I was by enlightened, pious parents, the voices of the *Tenach*<sup>1</sup> spoke early to my spirit, leading me to the *Gemorah*<sup>2</sup> when my intelligence had matured. It was my own inner life-plan and not external necessity that caused me to choose the Rabbinate. So much the more do I wonder that you fear to find in me the hypocrisy of office. Such, alas, is the curse of these times that people are inclined to say, "Yes, *he* must be so, *he* must speak thusly; his position — his livelihood — demands it." Sad degradation of the age! For bread, man will sell everything, his most cherished individuality, his innermost convictions. All is deemed excusable if it but yield — bread!

Forgive my agitation, dear friend. I shall now proceed to answer your letter and can dispense, I hope, with repeated assurances that my official position will not influence my reply.

You measure the value of Judaism by the standard of the purpose of human existence, which you find to be happiness and perfection. I could ask: Is it so sure that happiness and perfection constitute the goal and objective of man's existence? What answer could you give the casual pleasure-seeker or the criminal who considers thrills and the gratification of momentary sensual lust a greater happi-

ness than all the bliss of eternity? Happiness decreed in accordance with compulsory, external standards ceases to be happiness. Therefore, they will tell you, every man must be permitted to be his own judge of what, for him, constitutes happiness. And as for perfection of personality and mind — by how few men attained, by, oh, so few attainable!

But let us put aside, for a while, the standard of measurement, and let us try to understand that which we desire to measure; namely, Judaism, in accordance with its history and teachings. Perhaps, in the process, we may learn to think differently about the purpose of human existence and the destiny of mankind. We must become acquainted with Judaism from the source which it has rescued from the shipwreck of all its past prosperity as the only original document and guide to its true destiny — that is, from the Torah. From the Torah we must learn the history of Judaism, for Judaism is a historical phenomenon. The Torah is the sole source of Jewish law, written and oral. Therefore, on to the Torah!

But, before we open it, let us consider how we shall read it. Let us not read it for the purpose of conducting philological and antiquarian investigations, or to find support and corroboration for the antediluvian or geological hypotheses, or in the expectation of unveiling supermundane mysteries. It is as *Jews* that we must study the Torah, looking upon it as a Book given us by God that we may learn from it to know what we are and what we should be in this our earthly existence. It must be to us *Torah*; that is, a source of instruction and guidance in God's world, a generator of spiritual life within us. In order to understand Judaism we must be able to judge from within its



sphere and ask ourselves, "What will human beings be who recognize the contents of this Book as the rule of life given to them by God?" Similarly, we must strive to know the extent and bearing of the *Mitzvoth*, the commandments, from the Written and the Oral Law. All of this must be done from the standpoint of the objective of this procedure; namely, the finding of the true Law of Life!

Moreover, we must read the Torah in *Hebrew*; that is, in accordance with the spirit of that language. It describes but little, but through the rich significance of its verbal roots the word paints every detail of the picture. It is, as it were, a semi-symbolic language. We must read with a wakeful eye and ear, and with a mind attuned to the deeper sense and to the more profound meaning which lie beneath the surface. We must follow the same method in studying the *Mitzvoth* when they assign a purpose for a particular object or ordain a symbolic practice.

Now, let us read. Forget the annoyance which the reading of these writings caused you in your youth. Forget the prejudices which you may have imbibed from different sources against these writings. Let us read as though we had never read them before. Let us awaken within our soul the vital questions, "What should the world in me, and around me, mean to me? What should be my relationship to this world? What should I be as man-Israel?"

### Third Letter

## GOD AND THE WORLD

**I**SRAEL IS A HISTORICAL PHENOMENON. Without a doubt, history is the way to the fulfillment of the destiny of man in humanity as a whole. But man is not isolated; he is a creature amidst the other creatures, affected by them and affecting them in turn. Israel, history, mankind, the world—they all can be comprehended only through God the Creator. To our eye God reveals Himself only in His works. Through the concept of Israel, and Israel's duty, the Torah thus leads us to the knowledge of God, the world, the missions of mankind and history. Let us, then, follow the path of the Law.

The Torah summons us to view heaven and earth and proclaims, "From the beginning of existence, *Bereshith bara elokim*, God was active as the Creator" (Gen. 1:1). Do you see heaven in its eternal, silent, unchanging course, the bearer of light and heat and all the motive forces of our earth, with its millions of starry worlds, or resplendent in the magnificent radiance of the sun-ball? Do you see the earth, that swift runner<sup>1</sup>, with its eternal cycle of birth and death, of bloom and decay, with its millions of species, plants and animals, lights and colors? Do you see the firmament spread wide around the earth and the ocean embracing the world and the springs which burst forth from the fissures of the rocks, and flow on as rivulets, brooks and mighty rivers? Do you see the sun, the moon and the stars which, from their celestial stations above you, regu-

late the time of day and month and the seasons of the year? Do you delight in the firm surface of the earth, in its meadows and leafy trees, or in all the living things which stir in the water and in the air?

"There is One God, one omnipotent Creator," the Torah proclaims, "Through His word all that is was created." Heaven and earth are His handiwork; His are the light and air, sea and dry land; His are the plants and fishes, birds, insects and all beasts; His the sun, moon and stars. He spoke — *vayehi* — and it was. Now, behold separately each creation, from the blade of grass to the vast orb of the sun, each with its special purpose and each specially adapted in its form and matter for that purpose by the same Almighty wisdom. This Divine wisdom called to the light, "Serve the day;" to darkness, "Serve the night;" to the firmament, "Be the heaven over the earth;" to the gathering of waters, "Be the ocean;" to the dry substance, "Become thou the earth, the soil of life and development;" to the planets, "Be rulers of the seasons." Divine wisdom determined the purpose, and, in accordance with the purpose, ordained form, force and dimensions. He spoke — *vayehi ken*, and it was as it is, infinitesimally small or infinitely great. All was created by the Word of God, determined by His will, formed by His finger. To God, the Universal Force, belong all the forces which are at work in nature and the universe and all the laws which regulate life: from the force and the law which govern the fall of the stone or the growth of the seed, to those which determine the orbit of the planets or the unfolding of the human mind.

## THE NINETEEN LETTERS

This great throng of beings, though separated and distinguished by peculiar construction and different purposes, is united into one great harmonious system, each functioning in its own place, at its own time, in accordance with the faculties with which it is endowed, none interfering with the other. Who is it that has reconciled all these contrasts and united the countless into the All? *Va-yavdel elokim ben ha-or uven ha-choshech*. It is the same All-One Who has established harmony between light and darkness, between life and death: "Reconciler of contrasts is His Name." And everything which He created, formed and arranged — *va-yevarech elokim* — He also endowed with the blessing of permanence and growth. Not only *was* all through Him, all *is* through Him. His blessing is every bloom and blossom; His blessing every germ and fruit; His blessing, too, the babe whom you press to your loving breast. And He, Who created, formed, blessed and ordered — *vayinafash* — invisible as the soul within the body — He withdrew from sight, and concealed, even as the soul, in His creation, He continues, invisible, to create, preserve and develop. You behold His work, you admire His creations, you search out His laws, you enjoy His blessings — but Him, the Creator and Benefactor of the world Himself, your mortal eye shall never behold. Therefore when you behold and wonder, study and rejoice — bend your knee and worship Him, the Only One, Who created and shaped, ordered and blessed.

*"Attribute to the Lord all the offspring of forces,  
Attribute to the Lord all glory and power!  
Attribute to the Lord the revelation of His Name,  
Bow down to Him in raiment of Sanctuary!"*

*The voice of the Lord is upon the waters,  
 The Almighty One of Creation thunders;  
 The Lord is upon the mighty floods.  
 The voice of the Lord is in ever; force,  
 The voice of the Lord is in all beauty.  
 The voice of the Lord breaks the cedars,  
 The Lord shatters the forests of Lebanon,  
 He causes them to skip like the foal,  
 Lebanon and Sirion as the young Re-em.  
 The voice of the Lord splits the flaming fire,  
 The voice of the Lord affrights the wilderness of  
 Kadesh!*

*The voice of the Lord makes the gazelles give birth  
 Even as its strips bare the forests.  
 And in the Temple of His worship  
 His All proclaims 'Revelation.' " (Psalm 29)*

*"Even for this does my heart tremble and stir from its  
 place;  
 Hear ye, hear! The threatening of His voice and the  
 word —  
 How it leaps from His mouth!  
 Under the whole heaven we see Him,  
 His light on the pinions of the earth.  
 After Him rolls the thunder —  
 He thunders in the voice of His majesty —  
 But He follows not the track — e'en though His voice  
 is heard.  
 Thus does Omnipotence thunder — miracles in His  
 voice;  
 He does great things, though we notice not.*

## THE NINETEEN LETTERS

*Speaks to the snow, "Be upon the earth!"  
"And thou, rain, be messenger of heaven!"  
Verily the rain is the embassy of His power.  
Upon the hand of every man He imprints His seal,  
Remembers every member of His creation,  
Gathers the wild beasts in their lairs,  
That they rest in their hiding places.  
Storms come from hidden recesses,  
In its season icy coldness,  
From the breath of God — He causes frost,  
And the broad watery expanse becomes firm.  
When, also, bright rays dispel the mists  
He is it, Who scatters the clouds by His light.  
He! Cause of all causes! In wisdom creative  
He changes them that they fit their purpose.  
All is as He bids it be for His world of men, for the  
earth,  
For instruction, for earth-perfection, for love.  
We find Him." (Job, Chapter 37)*

Therefore, there is one Creator! All else, everything that you know, is the creation, the revelation of this One God. And as for this world — we live in God's own world; every living thing around us is God's creature and servant. Every force is God's messenger, each in its place, in its time, fulfilling His word, contributing its share to the work of the universe.

*"He Who clothes Himself with light as with a garment;  
Who spreads out the heavens as a carpet;  
Who erects over the waters His arches,  
Lays the clouds at His feet,*

### THIRD LETTER

*Who walks upon the wings of the wind,  
He makes the storms His messengers,  
The flaming fire His servants." (Psalm 104:2-4)*

They are His servants all — the storm wind, the lightning, the rain and the snow; the worm which crawls at your feet; the blade of grass which nods to you on the way, the thunder which rumbles majestically above you, and the cool breeze which fans your feverish cheek — they all serve God.

*"For, as the rain and the snow descend from Heaven  
And return not thither until they have moistened the  
earth,  
And caused it to bear and yield fruit  
Until it has given seed to the sower  
And bread to the eater;  
Thus also is My word which comes forth from My  
mouth,  
It shall not return unto Me empty:  
But it shall do that which I desire  
And accomplish that for which I sent it forth."  
(Isaiah 55:10, 11)*

All things are servants about the throne of the Lord. "For," say the Sages, "It was not with one creative word that the Almighty summoned all things, the universe and the individual, into being, so that each one should depend immediately and solely upon His behest for its existence and activity. On the contrary, it was in a series of ten developments that God called His world into existence, created an abundance of forces and caused them to pervade each other, working closely together in accordance with

## THE NINETEEN LETTERS

His will — uniting and separating them in such a manner that each should assist in maintaining the other; that none should contain alone the conditions of its existence and activity in itself, but should receive from fellow creatures, and impart to them in turn, the conditions of life and work."<sup>2</sup> He, in His infinite wisdom, ordained this mutual interdependence in order that each individual being might contribute, whether much or little, to the preservation of the All. Thus water, having penetrated the earth, is collected in cloud and sea; light, having pierced the earthy crust and brought forth plants, is concentrated again into sun, moon and stars; the germ, the offspring of earth, is taken from the soil and given to the crown of ripened fruition so that the earth may produce again. One glorious chain of love, of giving and receiving, unites all living things. All things exist in continuous reciprocal activity — one for All, All for one. None has power, or means, for itself; each receives only in order to give, and gives in order to receive, and finds therein the fulfillment of the purpose of its existence. "*Ha-Shem*" — "Love," say the Sages, "love which supports and is supported in turn" — that is the character of the Universe.



## Fourth Letter

### MAN

**N**OW AS TO MAN<sup>1</sup> — what is man in this God-filled world? Is he not also a creature of God? Is he not also a servant of the Lord? Every fiber of your body is a creation of the hand of God. Your spirit, the spark of the Divine, your personality, invisible as Deity itself, weave and work in this microcosm and control your intellect and your body. This mysterious spiritual force within you is in itself an emanation of Deity. Learn to deem yourself holy as a creature of God and consecrate yourself to your mission as a "servant of God." Since all things, the smallest and the greatest alike, are God's chosen messengers, should man alone be excluded from this sphere of blessed activity? Can it be that he is born only to take? Born not to fill any place, nor to fulfill any purpose but to let all things end in him? No! Your own conscience says it, even as the Torah proclaims; man is to be *tzelem elokim*, "an image of God." You are called not merely to enjoy or suffer. Spirit, body, wealth, every ability and every power, all constitute means of activity. They were given *le-oudoh ul-shomroh*, to promote and preserve the world—in love and righteousness. The earth is not yours, but you were given to the earth, to respect it as Divine soil and to deem each one of its creatures a creature of God, your fellow-being.

The Law to which all powers submit unconsciously and involuntarily, to it you shall also subordinate yourself, but consciously and of your own free will. "Deliberately and

freely" — these words indicate at once the sublime mission and the lofty privilege of man. All forces stand as servitors around the throne of God. They cannot see the reason of their mission, but they are compelled to act in accordance with their purpose. As for you, o man, you can comprehend yourself as a creature of God. You can at least faintly appreciate the motive of the mission which He has breathed into your being, and, as the first and highest servitor in all the host of servants, deliberately and freely, you join in the great chorus of servants, "*na-aseh ve-nishma*," "We will do and therefore hearken! We will act and, fulfilling, strive to comprehend the import of the command!"

Our vocation can be determined not by that which we gain, nor by the extent of the material or spiritual possessions which we amass; the measure of our worth will be determined by what we accomplish, how we use our material possessions and spiritual faculties to fulfill the will of God and to utilize our every talent, great or small, for the performance of a truly, human, God-serving deed. The outward measure for the deeds of men is compliance with the will of God. The spiritual measure for the greatness of man is his fulfillment of the Divine will in proportion to the potentialities with which he has been endowed. A human life, therefore, despite the purest sentiments, may be an utter failure if the deeds be not right. On the other hand, a man's life may be most sublime despite infinitesimal results, if his faculties did not suffice for more. Hence, happiness and perfection are nothing but the greatest plenitude of material and spiritual possessions, employed in accordance with the will of God. These, if so employed, alone constitute the greatness of man. The angel in charge

of man's formation, says one of our sages, takes the germ which is to grow into a human being, brings it before the Holy One, blessed be He, and asks, "This germ — what shall come of it in life? Shall he that will develop from it become strong or weak, wise or simple, rich or poor?"<sup>2</sup> He does not ask whether that man will be good or bad, pious or sinful. For all things depend upon the decree of God, with the exception of virtue and the fear of the Lord. These are left to the free will of man. He who, in his lifetime, with his particular measure of means and faculties, in his own station, fulfills the will of God as regards the creatures who enter into his sphere, he who injures none and assists all in accordance with the best of his abilities — he is a man. His entire life, his whole being, his thoughts and feelings, speech and actions, even his business transactions and his pleasures — all these are active service of God. Such a life is exalted above all change and decay.

The truly human personality, unchangeable almost as Deity itself, sees in its every gain or loss solely another summons to solve the same problem anew. No pleasure, no thought, no act, however trifling it may be, is empty and devoid of purpose. The fulfillment of God's will with our possessions and our pleasures, with our thoughts, our words and our deeds — this should be the content of our lives.

Go, now, my son, and examine yourself in comparison with a blade of grass or a rumbling peal of thunder. Then, if you do not blush with shame and cover your face in the presence of the angelic grandeur of such creatures, simply because of your own selfish pettiness, and if you do not then rouse yourself with all your strength, with every spark of your being, to acquire for yourself such angelic power —



#### FOURTH LETTER

*His servants all, fulfillers of His will!*

*Bless Him, all His creatures, in every place of His  
kingdom,*

*And thou, too, o my soul, bless the Lord."*

*(Psalm 103:15-22)*

## *Fifth Letter*

### EDUCATION

WE HAVE NOW, GUIDED BY THE TORAH, ascertained the position of man in Creation. He shall stand in the midst of the creatures of earthly world neither as a god nor a slave. Instead, he shall stand as a brother among his brother creatures. But he shall occupy the rank of first-born because of the peculiar nature and scope of his own service. He is to be the administrator of the whole Divine estate, the earthly world; to provide and care for all therein in accordance with the will of God. It is from God alone, the Source of all *might*, that man derives the *right* to take the earthly world for his own use. But with this right there also devolves upon him the *duty* to appropriate for himself only that which is *permitted* and to use it in strict accordance with the will of its Giver. "Good" to him should be only that which agrees with this Divine will; "evil" only that which stands in opposition to these principles. Not that should be deemed good or evil which is agreeable or disagreeable to man, or pleasant or unpleasant to his sensual nature.

For the task of man lies not in the gratification of his own impulses and lusts, nor in ambitions, self-aggrandizement and caprice. Instead, he is to elevate all his power, his desires and the demands of his body to be the means of carrying out the will of God. Man's freedom, of course, postulates the possibility of mistakes and error.

Man has the duty to submit of his own free will to

that Law which all other creatures are compelled to obey. This naturally implies that he also has the power to disobey it, should he choose to do so. Through the animal portion of his being, the demands of his body, he is threatened with temptation in the form of sensual lust. A point may be reached where man no longer will regard pleasure as a means but as an end in itself; where he will look upon himself as a master, forgetting that all things are Divine property lent him for specific purposes. Thus man may usurp to himself the right to subject all things to the domination of his own will.

When man's entire effort will be devoted to the gratification of animal lust, and the mind of the ruler will lower itself to be the slave of the beast, employing all its skill only to secure the gratification of bestial desires, the result will be the depth of degradation. Then man will become the most dangerous of all beasts of prey, for he is armed with an intellect, and the whole world will not be safe against the caprices of his passions.

While the Torah omits to narrate any revelation of God's will to mankind in general, one educational commandment does appear wherein we are shown man and his education by God. A world is laid at man's feet for him to possess and enjoy, but some pleasures are interdicted without any revealed reason, solely as a decree of the Most High. For man should subordinate himself to his Creator and for him, the highest in wisdom consists in obedience to the will of God simply because it is the will of *his* God. But to be willing to fulfill the demands of God's will only when, or because, they should appear to us right and wise

and good — could that be called obedience to God? Would that not rather be obedience solely to oneself?

All too often men regard only the sweet as good, and only the bitter as bad. The history of all sin is the same. God reveals Himself as the Judge, but also as the Father and Teacher. To judge is His prerogative, for does not the earth with all its fullness belong to Him? Have we not received from Him, and from Him alone, the power and the right to acquire and to enjoy? If we misuse this power but once, if we stretch out our hand but one single time toward that which is forbidden, have we not thereby forfeited every claim to the right of existence on earth? "On that day when you disregard the prohibition, you shall surely forfeit your life," is the warning of the Righteous Judge. Nevertheless, God does not exact the incurred penalty of sin from His fallen child, but strives, with fatherly love and forbearance, to guide him in the right paths.

The path to pleasure is made difficult for man in order to discourage the development of the animal aspect of his being. Man will often forget God and cling to transitory possessions as though they were the eternal good. Then sufferings will afflict his life to teach him that parents and family, friends and acquaintances, wealth and possessions, body and soul are all but gifts of God, and that man himself is not everything.

But freedom delays the success of education. Labor nurtures pride and man calls "his" the soil which he has moistened with his sweat (*Cain*). The necessity of providing for the satisfaction of physical cravings causes man to see himself only as an animal and to regard his mind only as a means of helping secure the gratification of physical



desire. Then the humanity of man descends (*Nephilim*). The acknowledgment of God as the sole Ruler and Father has grown dim. For once man endeavors to carry out not the will of God, but solely his own, he no longer has an eye for the Law of the All-One Whom all creatures serve, and the world divides itself before him into as many gods as he sees forces at work. It seems to him that these forces of nature are at work not because they *must* operate, but only because they *wish* to do so, for the awareness of the Law has departed from his own breast. Desiring only possessions and pleasures, he becomes a slave of the beings from which he hopes to attain the fulfillment of his desires. He bends the knee to creatures (*Enosh*) until, finally, recognizing the omnipotence of his passions, he deifies them. Since all creatures seem to him not servants of one great world scheme, but independent forces, seeking power and pleasure, he soon ceases to look upon the pursuit of power and thrills as bestial and unworthy of man, but deems it divine and man's most worthy goal. Polytheism becomes the grave of all that is human within him. The generation of man seemed irreclaimable and thus destruction was its lot. Only one man, the father of one family who walked before the All-One, who strove after righteousness, elevated himself by controlling and ennobling the animal within him. He offered some comfort in this destruction of the generation of man, and he was saved, together with his family, to found a new edifice of mankind (*Noah*).

## *Sixth Letter*

### HISTORY

**T**HE NEW GENERATION WHICH, seeing all this, should have learned to recognize God as the Judge and Master, soon forgot this lesson in the belief that it could dispense with God in the establishment and maintenance of its new life. Here history begins. God no longer wills the destruction of mankind, but its education. Humanity must not sink again to the level of degradation reached by the generation which had perished. Men must be dispersed lest the corruption of any one part of the family of man be quickly communicated to the whole. They must be scattered in order that mankind may be reborn of itself.

In order to make this plan of education possible, the earth was reconstituted after it had been laid waste and desolated. It was reshaped into lands and continents. Soil and climate, seas and rivers, mountains and deserts formed a diversified pattern upon the earth, which, by God's own plan, was intended to influence man profoundly and to affect his body, his opinions, his habits, his passions and his speech. A broad and variegated experience should train man to become worthy of God and of himself. It should teach him to recognize the supreme dominion of God over nature and human life. It should bring him to realize that the task of man is more than merely to possess and enjoy.

From that time forth, nation after nation has entered into the arena of history. Each brings with it some new power, some new talent of the human intellect, and it makes

use of these faculties, in battle with nature and with other nations, for the purpose of obtaining wealth and pleasure. And then, once a nation has thus succeeded in climbing to the summit of material greatness, then, in its very greatness, or perhaps because of it, it will crash down into destruction. The time will and must come when every nation, through its own rise and fall, will have inscribed in the book of history, as its evaluation of human greatness, the word "*Hevel*" (vanity). The time must come, and it will come, when all the works of violence and the schemes of materialist cunning will be crushed, when only that will permanently endure which man has based upon God-revering righteousness and love. There will come a time when mankind will again comprehend true human greatness to which wealth and desire are but means, when man will be mature enough to ask himself not "What should we do in order to be happy and blessed," but, "Once we are happy and blessed, what shall we do with our blessings?"

*"At the end of days the mountain of the Lord will be  
firmly established upon the peaks of the  
mountains,  
And borne by the hills — and to it all peoples shall  
stream.  
And there shall go great nations and speak,  
'Come, let us go to the mountain of the Lord, to the  
House of the God of Jacob,  
And He will teach us His ways and we shall walk in  
His paths;  
For from Zion shall come forth the Law, and the word  
of the Lord from Jerusalem.'*

## THE NINETEEN LETTERS

*He will judge between the nations and teach mighty  
peoples,*

*That they shall beat their swords to scythes  
And their spears into pruning hooks,  
That no people shall lift up the sword against another,  
And they shall learn war no more.*

*O House of Jacob, go before us so that we may also  
walk in the light of the Lord!*

*For thou hast forsaken us, thy people, O House of  
Jacob!*

*So that they willed themselves from the East,  
They became time-servers, like the Philistines,  
And had to content themselves with things born of  
strangers.*

*And when His earth became full of silver and gold  
and there was no end of treasures,*

*And when His earth became full of horses, and there  
was no end of chariots,*

*Thus also His earth was filled with gods.*

*The works of His hands bowed to that which His  
fingers had formed.*

*Then mankind bowed — thus sank humanity — and  
Thou didst not lift them up!*

*'Enter into the rock, hide yourselves in the dust,  
Before the terror of the Lord, before the greatness of  
His majesty.'*

*Thus will be lowered the eye of the haughtiness of  
man,*

*And God alone will be great on that day.  
For there is a day unto the Lord Tzebaoth  
Concerning every proud and high thing, yea,*

*concerning all the haughty  
 That they sink!  
 Concerning all the cedars of Lebanon, though high  
 and exalted,  
 And concerning all the oaks of Bashan;  
 Concerning all the high mountains and all the elevated  
 hills,  
 Concerning every high tower and every strong wall,  
 Concerning all the ships of Tarshish and all the  
 edifices of lust,  
 That the pride of man may be bowed down, and  
 human haughtiness broken,  
 And that the Lord alone may be great on that day;  
 He will cause the gods to disappear in smoke,  
 And people shall hasten into the clefts of rocks and  
 the cavities of earth,  
 Before the terror of the Lord and the greatness of His  
 majesty  
 When He arises to rule the earth."*

*(Isaiah, Chapter 2)*

When you will have read through the pages of history, then, together with the "voice which gathers all," you will exclaim:

*"Vanity of vanities! All is vain!  
 What is the end of man with all his toil under the sun?  
 Generations go, generations come, and the development  
 of earth marches ever to a hidden future;  
 Here rises fortune's sun, there it sinks, even while  
 rising, and to its place of setting its course  
 is turned,*

## THE NINETEEN LETTERS

*Rises to midday strength and turns to midnight gloom.  
Thus circles the day, and in its circling turns again to  
its beginning.*

*All the streams of nations rush to the sea, but the sea  
is not filled;*

*To the spot where the streams are born, they return  
only to flow anew.*

*All words are powerless, no man can speak;  
The eye cannot see enough, the ear not fully hear;  
What was is yet to be, what was produced is yet to be  
produced,*

*And so there is never anything all new under the sun.  
If thou speakest, 'Behold, this is new!' verily, it came  
into being in the ages of the past.*

*There is no remembrance of the former ones,  
Forsooth, of the latest there will be no remembrance.  
Were I to devote my heart to search,  
Yea, in wisdom to study all that takes place under the  
sun,*

*Useless would be the toil — God gave it to the children  
of man*

*For matter of thought, that they might busy themselves  
with it.*

*Hence I see all the things that happen under the sun,  
And beholds all is vanity and useless wearying of the  
spirit!*

*That which is perverse itself can straighten nothing;  
An imperfection itself — hence it cannot be counted.  
This is the purpose of the word — that all may be  
revealed and heard,*

*That, to look up to God with reverence,*

*To fulfill His commandments,  
Shall constitute the all of humanity."*

*(Ecclesiastes 1:2-15 and 12, 13)*

*"O Lord, Thou art a dwelling place. Thou abidest  
with us*

*As generations follow after generations;*

*Before the mountains were born, Thou didst cause  
the earth to bring forth,*

*Even the inhabited world of men!*

*Yea, from hidden past to veiled future — Thou art the  
all-moving force!*

*Degraded mankind Thou lettest sink to destruction's  
verge —*

*Then speakest, 'Return to human worth, o sons of  
man'*

*For a thousand years, as seen by Thee, are as yesterday  
when it has passed away.*

*Even as a watch in the night.*

*Thou causest them to stream away — sleep they become;*

*In the morning — stands as fresh grass,*

*In the morning — man flourishes and blooms,*

*But at eventide, he is withered and dry."*

*(Psalm 90:1-7)*

*"O Lord, be gracious unto us and bless us,*

*Let Thy rule ever shine about us!*

*That there be known on earth Thy way,*

*Amongst all nations Thy salvation;*

*That the nations shall acknowledge Thee, O God,*

*Even the nations altogether.*

## THE NINETEEN LETTERS

*That the nations rejoice and be glad,  
That Thou judgest the peoples in righteousness  
And Thou guidest the nations on earth. (Selah).  
The nations will acknowledge Thee, O God,  
Even the nations altogether.  
When the course of earth's growth shall have yielded  
its fruit,  
Then God, even our own God, will thus bless us.  
Then God will bless us and all the ends of the earth  
will worship Him."*

(Psalm 67)

*"Thus says David, the son of Jesse,  
Thus says the man, highly exalted,  
Anointed of the God of Jacob,  
Sweet singer of Israel.  
The spirit of God spoke in me,  
His word was upon my tongue.  
There spoke to me the God of Israel,  
To me spoke Israel's Rock.  
'Among mankind righteousness shall prevail,  
The fear of God shall conquer.  
When the morning shall shine,  
Bright as the sun it shall flash,  
That morn shall know no cloud.  
For from the radiance, from the rain  
Grass shall have sprung from the earth.'  
For not so is my house with God,  
For a covenant of concealed eternity He established  
for me,  
In the All, ordered and preserved.  
All-embracing is my salvation,*



*All-embracing the goal,  
Though it shine not yet forth.  
'But deeds of violence,  
Like scattered thorns are they all,  
Though not removed by a hand that is seen.  
Of course, were man to attack them,  
He would need to gird himself with iron and spear;  
But in this manner — in the fire  
It shall be burned unseen,  
Through invisible direction.'* "

(II Samuel 23:1-7)

## *Seventh Letter*

### ISRAEL

**F**ROM THE BEGINNING OF THE PASSAGE OF ISAIAH you have comprehended the place which Israel should occupy in the course of the history of the nations. Because men had eliminated God from life, and even from nature, they found the basis of life in possessions and its aim in enjoyment. They deemed life the product of the multitude of human desires, and looked upon nature as the product of a multitude of gods. Thus it became necessary that one people be introduced into the ranks of the nations which, through its history and life, should declare that God is the only creative cause of existence, and that the fulfillment of His will is the only goal of life. This people was to bear as the motive and the incentive for its unity the revelation of His will, rejuvenated and renewed for its own sake, unto all parts of the world. This mission required for its execution a nation, poor in everything upon which the rest of mankind reared the edifice of its greatness and power; externally subordinate to the nations armed with proud self-sufficiency, but fortified inwardly by direct reliance upon God, so that, by the suppression of every enemy force, God might reveal Himself directly as the sole Creator, Judge and Master of nature and history.

Despite its position of political dependence, however, this people was to receive from the hands of its Creator all the means of both individual and national existence and prosperity, in order that it might dedicate all its wealth

of resources to one sole purpose — the fulfillment of the will of God.

"There is One God, Creator, Lawgiver, Judge, Guide, Preserver and Father of all living things; all living things are His servants, His children. Man is also His child and His servant. It is from His hands that man has received all he has, and all of it is to be used solely for the fulfillment of His will. This alone is sufficient for the proper building of a good life. All other human occupations and pursuits are but paths leading to the fulfillment of this calling of mankind."

It was to be the chief mission, if not the sole mission, of this people to proclaim these great truths.

This must be a people, then, which acknowledges *Hashem*, "the ineffable Lord of Love," as the sole *Elokim*, Omnipotent Master and Judge; a people which recognizes God as the sole Founder, Guide and Mover of its thoughts, feelings, words and deeds; a people which knows that whatever it has, is received from Him, and which, with all its might, should live for Him and for Him alone.

Such a mission imposed upon this people another duty, the duty of separation, of ethical and spiritual separateness. It could not join in the doings of the other peoples lest it descend to their level and perish in the abyss of their worship of wealth and pleasure. It must remain alone and do its work and live its life as a separate entity until, refined and purified by Israel's teachings and Israel's example, humanity as a whole might turn to God and acknowledge Him as the sole Creator and Ruler. Once that is attained, Israel's mission will have been accomplished.

*"The Lord from Sinai came, from Seir shone He forth,*

## THE NINETEEN LETTERS

*Appeared from Poron's mount, with myriad holiness  
came.*

*At His right hand there was for Him the fire of the  
Law.*

*Though He loved all the nations, His holy ones were  
implements in Thy hand;*

*When they shall be led through the steps of Thy acts,  
They, too, shall utter forth Thy words*

*The Torah which Moses commanded unto us  
Is the heritage of the congregation of Jacob."*

(Deut. 33:2-4)

## *Eighth Letter*

### THE PATRIARCHS. EGYPT. THE WILDERNESS. THE LAND.

**A** BRAHAM WAS CHOSEN as the progenitor of this people. He was a man who, in his own personal life, had already fulfilled the ideal of the people that was to be. He had cast away from him his native land, his family, his father's house, and all those things which men love and cherish, in order to follow Him Who had called him. He accepted the mission to become the progenitor of a people from which "blessing should come to all the peoples of the earth which would keep the way of the Lord, to do righteousness and justice," and followed Him. He carried out the ideal of this love for the All-One in his love for his own children and for his fellow-men. He cared for them; he saved them, he instructed them whenever and wherever he could, and he prayed for them to the Judge of All. And the One for Whom Abraham had left everything, and Whose call he had followed into a strange land, protected Abraham in his wanderings, and blessed him, so that he needed to obtain safety and blessings only from His hands, and used them solely for the salvation of the world.

To this love (*Ahavah*) was joined *Emunah*, trust, firm as the immovable rocks, which beholds life as sustained by the All-One, and therefore cleaves to His promises, however little the present may seem to justify that trust, and *Yirah*, that true fear of God which makes a person ready at any time to surrender, uncomplainingly, even his most

## THE NINETEEN LETTERS

precious treasure to the Most High. These sentiments of the soul were transmitted as an inheritance to Isaac, Abraham's son, and to Jacob, his grandson. The former manifested more prominently the qualities of *Yirah*, while the latter displayed *Emunah* as his outstanding character trait.

*"They wandered from people to people, from one  
Kingdom to another nation,  
He permitted no man to oppress them,  
But punished princes for their sake,  
Saying 'Touch not My anointed ones,  
And do no evil unto My prophets.'"*

(Psalm 105:13-15)

God revealed Himself in the lives of these individuals as the "invisibly ruling Providence" until they increased and became a family of seventy persons, which constituted the nucleus of the future nation. But the people which grew from this kernel was not immediately fit for its sublime mission. It first had to be trained, taught until it had attained the ability to perform its task. In contrast to the other peoples, it could become properly prepared for its duties as a nation only through the school of suffering. It had to be deprived of all that which ordinarily constitutes the glory of nations, even of that which to the superficial eye spells the quality of humanity.

Egypt, which at that time prided itself of having attained the apex of human civilization, and which looked upon its soil and its river as its gods, became the cradle of misery in which Israel was trained for its great mission. As a reward for a service rendered by one of its own (Joseph), Israel was invited to make its home in the land of the Nile. There the children of Israel were guests at first, and then citizens.

Yet Egypt, revering only material wealth, knew not the All-One and did not look upon all human beings as His children. In the arrogance of its power, it flouted the rights of guests and men, and made Israel its slave. Israel descended to the lowest level of human existence, though its numbers had increased to the dimensions of a nation. And Egypt, once a host, became unto Israel a tyrant, proud in its might, mocking and scorning the feeble and the oppressed. Then appeared the All-One!

*"Upon a light cloud He appeared,  
And Egypt's gods trembled."*

He revealed Himself as the sole Creator, as the Lord of Nature, the God of Nations, the Vindicator of the Oppressed, the Judge of the Arrogant. Mitzrayim's greatness sank before the majesty of the people which had none but God alone. This God spoke — and the walls of the Egyptian prison sank down, and freed of its chains, the people marched forth. From the hands of God it received freedom and nationhood, and, as the objective of all this, the revelation of His will as a guide for human life — the Torah. In the school of Egypt, in its training in the wilderness, *Emunah* was to become the basic element of Israel's character. It was to acquire that firmness of devotion to the All-One which was to strengthen and comfort it in the manifold trials which it was to undergo.

In the wilderness Israel received the Torah, and thus, in the wilderness, without land or soil of its own, it became a nation. It became a body whose soul was the Torah, and therefore it could truly be called *Mamlechet Kohanim*, a "kingdom of priests." For, even as the priest in the midst of a people, so this nation was to be in the midst of all

mankind, preserving the law of God, and practicing and fulfilling its sacred precepts. It was also to be *goy kadosh*, "a holy nation," for, by fulfilling the Law of God, Israel was to become holy. It was to become holy not by participating in the worldly activities of other nations, but by preaching the sanctity of humanity by the example of its own life. The Torah, the fulfillment of God's will, was to be its soil, its basis and its purpose. Israel's existence as a nation, therefore, was neither dependent upon, nor conditioned by transitory things, but eternal as the spirit, as the soul and as the Word of the Eternal.

But it was to enter history as a people in the midst of the peoples. As a people it was to show the peoples that God is the source and the giver of all blessings. It was as a people that Israel was to demonstrate to the other nations that to dedicate oneself to the fulfillment of God's will is equivalent to the attainment of any happiness that man can wish for, that this sacred resolve is sufficient to give stability and security to human existence. It received, therefore, the gifts of a land and of statehood, not, however, as an end unto itself, but solely as a means for carrying out the Torah. Whether or not Israel would possess and retain its land, therefore, depended upon whether or not it would fulfill the demands of the Torah. And in its happiness, too, it was to remain separate from the nations, lest it learn from them to revere this its prosperity as the goal of life, and, like them, descend to the worship of wealth and lust.

How glorious a sight this people, if it would succeed in attaining its ideal! One God, the All-One; one Lord and Father of them all, and they themselves all equal brothers, subject to the fatherly rule of the All-One. Their greatness



is to consist solely in the fulfillment of His will in love and righteousness. It was in order for it to be able successfully to accomplish its task, that the blessings of God were lavishly poured out unto Israel, without stint or limitation.

*"How goodly are thy tents, o Jacob,  
Thy tabernacles, o Israel!  
They are stretched forth as brooks,  
As gardens by the river,  
As aloes which the Lord has planted,  
As cedars by the water.  
The water flows from the vessels of God.  
'Tis His seed by the rushing streams.  
Therefore shall His king be exalted above Agag,  
And His kingdom shall be uplifted . . ."*

(Num. 24:5-7)

*"One sees no wickedness in Jacob,  
Therefore one beholds no violence in Israel;  
The Lord, his God, is with him,  
For the acknowledgment of his king is within him;  
And the God, Who led them forth from Egypt,  
Is strength to him as the Re'em's mighty power.  
For there is no sorcery in Jacob,  
Nor wizardry in Israel.  
The time will come — then one will seek in Jacob and  
in Israel  
What God has wrought."*

(Num. 23:21-23)

## *Ninth Letter*

### EXILE

ONLY FOR A SHORT TIME was Israel able to attain its ideal, the fulfillment of its mission amidst prosperity. Even Moses, the first leader of the nation, foretold that, once upon God's soil, the children of Israel would forget God. Led astray by the example of the other nations, they would esteem only wealth and pleasures as desirable, and would become oblivious to their mission. There came the time when, even in Israel, the prophet could lament, "As the number of their cities were thy gods, o Judah." It became necessary to take away the abundance of earthly goods, the wealth and the land which had led Israel to stray from its mission. Israel was forced to leave the happy soil which had seduced it from its allegiance to the Most High. Nothing was to be saved except the soul of its existence, the Torah. No other bond of unity was henceforth to exist except "God and its Mission" which are indestructible because they are spiritual concepts. But Israel's mission did not cease with the end of its statehood, for that had been intended only as a means to an end. On the contrary, this destruction itself was a part of Israel's lot, another aspect of Israel's fulfillment of its calling. Israel had been guilty of sins no different from those that had prevailed in the other nations, but that which could be tolerated in other states could not be excused in that of Israel. For Israel's special office was to keep itself pure from all sin and perversity, since *Hashem* was its God.

Destruction and misfortune are therefore no less instructive for Israel than prosperity. Dispersion opened a new, great and widespread field for the fulfillment of its mission. But before the great wanderings of the Jews through the ages and among the nations truly began, God first gathered them once more upon their home soil. There, in their national home, they bound even closer to themselves the Torah which was henceforth to be the sole bond to hold them together. On the very eve of the exile, one branch left the parent tree. This branch had to alienate itself to a certain degree from the latter, in order to bring to the world, which had sunk to the depths of polytheism, violence, immorality and inhumanity, the tidings of the existence of the All-One, of the brotherhood of man and his superiority to the beast, and to teach the nations to cast off the bondage of the worship of wealth and lust. Now the nation was scattered to the four corners of the earth, among all the nations and unto all the regions of the world, in order that, in dispersion, it might fulfill its mission. "Back to the wilderness" says the Prophet.

*"Back to the wilderness; pave there the path of the  
Lord!*

*Make smooth in evening gloom a way for our God!  
So that, when every valley will be lifted, and hill and  
mountain are lowered,*

*And all the rough ground is smoothed and the ridges  
made even,*

*There will be revealed the glory of the Lord,  
And all flesh shall see that the mouth of God has  
spoken."*

(Isaiah 40:3-5)

## THE NINETEEN LETTERS

And, indeed, Israel accomplished its task better in exile than in the full possession of prosperity. The main purpose of *Galuth* (exile) was to make Israel a better nation. With its own eyes Israel beheld the destruction of the power and splendor which had dazzled it and which it had begun to worship as its gods. Could it then, ever, again adore wealth, power and grandeur as the gods of life? Devoid of power, splendor, bereft of the brilliant show of human grandeur, Israel was upheld by its faithfulness toward the All-One. The spirit and the maintenance of the only treasure which it could rescue, the Torah, kept it alive amidst suffering and agony and enabled it to endure all the blows dealt it by savage fanaticism unleashed.

Other states, everywhere, in all the glory of human power and arrogance, disappeared from the face of the earth, while Israel, though devoid of might and splendor, lived on because of its loyalty to God and His Law. Could Israel, then, refuse to acknowledge the All-One as its God, and to accept His Torah as its sole mission on earth?

And, in truth, it proved that this training had not been in vain. A thousand time delusion armed with violence has opened to Israel a path to the fullness of earthly happiness, if only it would, with but one single word, declare its rejection of God and its disregard of His Torah. But every time Israel would scornfully cast aside this tempting key to an easy life, preferring, rather, to bow its neck to the executioner's blow. It even sacrificed its own scanty measure of happiness, the most precious treasures of life on earth — wives, children, parents, brothers and sisters, life, property, and all the joys of earthly existence. It is written with Israel's heart-blood upon all the pages of history that

there is but One God, and that there are higher and better things for mankind than wealth and pleasure. All of Israel's *Galuth* history is one vast altar upon which it sacrificed all that men desire and love, all for the sake of the acknowledgment of God and His Law.

If, however, in the midst of a world which worships wealth and lust, Israel were to live a tranquil life of righteousness and love; if, while everywhere else the generation of man is rapidly sinking into the depths of sensuality and immorality, Israel's sons and daughters should bloom forth in the splendor of youth, purity and innocence, ah, what a powerful instrument for the good could Israel be! If, though everywhere else avarice, lust and greed should become the motives for human action, every Jew would be a mutely eloquent example and teacher of universal righteousness and universal love; if thus the dispersed of Israel were to show themselves everywhere on earth as the glorious priests of God and pure humanity; if only we were, or would become, that which we should be, if only our lives were a perfect reflection of our Law — what a mighty force we would constitute for steering mankind to the final goal of all human education! This would affect mankind more quietly, but much more forcefully and profoundly than even our tragic record of suffering, powerfully though this latter proclaims the intervention of Providence in human affairs.

When such an ideal and such a mission await us, can we still, dear Benjamin, deplore our fate?

*"Keep yourselves pure — o ye that bear the weapons of the Lord!"*

## THE NINETEEN LETTERS

*For not in levity should you go forth, nor walk in  
carelessness,  
For He that walks before you is the God of Israel.  
Behold — only if my servant be wise  
Will he be high and exalted and very great.  
Even as many were amazed at thee, 'Has not his  
appearance lost all manly semblance  
And his likeness all that is human!  
So will light come to many peoples,  
And princes shall close their mouths,  
For what was not told unto them they shall see,  
And what they never heard they shall comprehend.  
'Who would have believed our report,  
The arm of the Lord, upon whom is it revealed?  
He rises as a sapling before him, and as a root from  
arid land.  
He had neither form nor beauty that we should look  
upon him;  
Nor comeliness that we should desire him.  
He was despised and forsaken of men;  
Delivered to sorrows, acquainted with sickness  
And when God hid His face from him, we despised  
him and considered him not,  
Yet 'twas but sickness from us he bore;  
Pains we had inflicted were his burden.  
And as for us — we deemed him touched by the finger  
of God,  
Stricken by God and afflicted!  
But he, though stricken through our sins,  
Though crushed through our iniquities,  
The bond of our peace he took upon him,*

*And in His congregation there was healing for us<sup>1</sup>  
 We had all gone astray as sheep;  
 Each one had turned to his own way;  
 But the Lord afflicted only him —  
 Smote him for the sin of us all.  
 He was oppressed, was harshly persecuted,  
 Silent endured and opened not his mouth.  
 As a sheep to the slaughter he was led,  
 As a lamb before the shearers was he dumb,  
 Nor opened he his mouth.  
 Of kingly rule and judgeship was he deprived,  
 And his fate, who could tell it?  
 For he was cut off from the land of life,  
 Through the sin of the nations came affliction unto  
 him.*

*The wicked brought him to the grave,  
 The great and wealthy to his death,  
 Though violence he had never used  
 And deceit was not in his mouth.  
 But the Lord found His purpose in his affliction and  
 sickness,*

*That he should yield himself as a guilt offering,  
 (Nevertheless destruction was not God's plan, but  
 that)*

*He should see posterity, prolong days,  
 And the purpose of the Lord should be fulfilled  
 through his hand.*

*Through suffering he should gain insight,  
 Should learn to be content,  
 And with his knowledge propagate the right,  
 And do My service unto the many whose sins he bore.*

## THE NINETEEN LETTERS

*Therefore shall I give him a portion among the many,  
With mighty ones his lot shall be,  
Because he laid bare to death his soul,  
And suffered himself to be counted with sinners,  
Whereas he had borne the sin of many  
And for sinners suffered himself to be stricken.'*  
*Shout gladly, o barren one, that has never borne;  
Break forth in gladsome shouting and rejoice,  
Thou that has never known the pain of childbirth,  
For more are the children of the desolate one  
Than of her that has a husband, says the Lord.  
Make broad the space of thy tent,  
The carpets of thy dwellings, let them expand,  
Keep them not back;  
Make long thy cords, thy pegs make firm,  
For to the right and to the left shalt thou spread forth.  
Nations shall join themselves to thy children,  
And desolate cities will be inhabited.  
Fear not, thou shalt not be put to shame,  
Be not abashed, for thou hast no cause to grow pale,  
For the shame of thy youth thou wilt forget,  
The disgrace of thy widowhood no more remember.  
For thy Lord and thy Creator, 'Reconciler of  
Contradictions' is His Name,  
And thy redeemer, the Holy One of Israel — God of  
the whole earth is He now called!  
For as a wife forsaken and sad the Lord recalls thee,  
'O spouse of youth, do not thou despise thyself,' says  
thy God.  
For a short moment I forsook thee,  
But with great compassion I take thee back.*



*In overwhelming wrath I hid my face for a moment  
from thee,*

*But with everlasting mercy I have compassion upon  
thee.*

*Says thy Redeemer, the Lord.*

*For as Noah's flood is this to Me;*

*Even as I swore that Noah's flood should no more  
come to pass on earth,*

*So have I sworn no more to be wroth with thee,*

*No more o'er thee my anger hot to pour.*

*Though the mountains should be moved,*

*And the hills be shaken,*

*My mercy from thee shall not be moved,*

*And my covenant of peace shall not be shaken,*

*Says He that has compassion with thee, the Lord.*

*O thou poor, storm-driven one, unconsolated,*

*Behold, in rare clay shall I set thy stones,*

*And have established thee in sapphires.*

*Of crystal shall I make thy windows,*

*And thy gates into flashing stones,*

*And all thy territory into stones of pleasantness.*

*And all thy children shall be disciples of the Lord,*

*And great, therefore, shall be the peace of thy children.*

*Only through righteousness canst thou be established.*

*Keep far from wrong, for thou needst not fear,*

*From terror, for it will not come nigh unto thee.*

*None shall fear aught but Me, who, therefore, among  
thee*

*Could fear that aught would befall thee?*

*Verily, I have created every artisan*

*That blows in the fire the coal*

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*And brings forth a tool for his work;  
I have created every destruction  
That it may be born;  
No weapon, formed against thee, shall succeed;  
Every tongue that rises against thee in judgment thou  
    shalt refute.*

*This is the inheritance of the servants of the Lord,  
And of those whose righteousness is from Me, says  
    the Lord.*

*Each one who thirsts, let him come to the water;  
You that have no silver, come, buy and eat;  
Come, buy without silver and without price  
Wine that revives and milk that nourishes.  
Why weigh you out silver and receive not bread,  
Your earnings and receive no satisfaction?  
Hearken unto me and eat that which is good,  
And may your soul be delighted with abundance.  
Incline your ear and come unto me;  
Hear, so that your soul may be quickened,  
And I will make with you an eternal covenant,  
Even the ever faithful love of David.*

*For behold, I gave him as a witness for the peoples,  
Communicating and enjoining duty to the nations.  
Behold, a people which thou knowest not, thou wilt  
    call,*

*And nations that know thee not unto thee will hasten,  
For the sake of the Lord, thy God, the Holy One of  
    Israel that adorns thee.*

*Seek the Lord, the ever present;  
Call upon Him, the ever near.  
Let the passionate forsake his way,*

*And the man of violence his counsel,  
And let him return to the Lord;  
He will have compassion upon him;  
Even to our God, for He forgives much.  
Verily, my thoughts are not your thoughts,  
And your ways are not My ways, says the Lord.  
For as the heavens are high above the earth,  
Thus are My ways high above your ways,  
And My thoughts above your thoughts.  
For as the rain and the snow fall from heaven  
And return not thither again,  
Until it has watered the earth and made it bear  
And caused plants to spring forth;  
Thus also My word, which goes forth from My mouth,  
Shall not return empty to Me;  
But it carries out what I desired,  
And accomplished that for which I sent it.  
For in joy shall you go forth, and in peace return,  
Mountains and hills shall greet you with joyful  
    shouting,  
And all the trees of the field shall clap their hands;  
Beneath the thorn-bush the cedar rises even now, and  
    the myrtle beneath the thistle.  
And shall remain, as glory to the Lord, reminder of  
    hidden time;  
Shall nevermore be uprooted.  
Thus has the Lord said, 'Take heed of justice!'  
Practice righteousness; then will My salvation soon  
    come,  
My righteousness then will soon be revealed.  
Happy the man that practices this,*

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*The son of Adam that holds fast to it.  
He who keeps the Sabbath that he profane it not,  
Keeps his hand that it do no evil.  
Neither should the son of the stranger that joins  
himself to the Lord,  
Say, 'Verily, the Lord will separate me from His  
people.'  
Neither should the childless speak  
'I am a dry tree!'  
For thus says the Lord to the childless ones who keep  
My Sabbaths,  
Who choose what I desire and hold fast to My covenant,  
'Verily, I shall give them in My house, within My  
walls,  
A place and a name, better than sons and daughters;  
I shall give him the name of eternity, which shall  
never be cut off;  
And the sons of the stranger, who join themselves to  
the Lord,  
To serve him and to love the Name of the Lord,  
To dedicate themselves to him as servants.  
Whosoever gives heed to the Sabbath, not to profane it,  
Whosoever holds fast to My covenant,  
I shall bring them all to My holy mountain,  
I shall cause them all to rejoice in My house of prayer,  
Their burnt offerings and sacrifices shall be pleasing  
upon My altar,  
For My House — a House of Prayer shall it be called  
for all the nations.' "*

(Isaiah 52:11 — 56:7)

## *Tenth Letter*

### CLASSIFICATION OF THE COMMANDMENTS

**M**Y LIGHT AND SKETCHY BRUSH-STROKES have succeeded in reconciling you to the fate of your people. Nay, more, you are happy that you belong to this people, despite its poverty and lowliness — indeed, because of it. What a glorious result of our correspondence, dear Benjamin! But, when you feel exalted by the ideal of your lofty calling, and then look upon the Law which supposedly bears within it the translation of this ideal into reality, you feel as if a yawning chasm were intervening between it and yourself. You cannot repress a sensation of uneasiness and bewilderment when you think that *this* is supposed to be the Will of God. Nor do you see therein any real task, any ideal work to which you are called, nothing but prayer and a passive, contemplative life, and, in addition, unreasonable demands and senseless practices.

Dear friend, forget whatever you have known of Judaism heretofore; listen as though you had never heard anything concerning its teachings, and you will not only be reconciled to the Law, but you will be filled with genuine love for it and willingly allow your entire life to be an expression and manifestation of this Law.

Again, I shall now give you only fundamental principles, general outlines of the component parts of the Jewish doctrinal system, hardly anything but the nomenclature of terms and concepts, and I shall leave both elucidation and demonstration for the future.

Every opinion which I shall express is the result of many years' study of the Bible, Talmud and Midrash. Every detail and every step is confirmed in the Gemarah, if this latter be but comprehended according to the true meaning of its words and if, at every point, we will put to ourselves the questions "What have I heard here?", "What is the underlying concept of this statement?", and, "What is its purpose?", "What is the object of the symbolic act?", and, "What is its natural meaning, if understood in terms of its context and in accordance with its purpose?" We must, furthermore, carefully distinguish between *de-oraita*<sup>1</sup> and *de-rabbanan*,<sup>2</sup> and seek to grasp the former by comprehending the essence and nature of the Biblical law, and the latter by making clear to ourselves the steps and means required for the practical execution and fulfillment of the law. We must take into account the unique characteristics of the original which, having been intended for oral transmission only, gives only the specific rule, adapted for immediate application, but omits the universal, the spirit, leaving that for direct individual instruction or personal effort to attain.

After all the foregoing, I ask you, what do you expect of the Torah? Obviously, you expect the revelation of a rule of conduct, of how, using the powers and faculties that are yours, you may fulfill the will of God toward the beings by whom you are surrounded; in other words, how you may practice love and justice with and toward all living things.

Add to this also the idea of the mission of Israel as a people called not only to fulfill these principles in life, but also to preserve and propagate their theoretic concepts

for its own education and that of others. Join to it, furthermore, the laws and ordinances which derive their origin naturally from the life Israel once led as a state and which, in the absence of land and state, became inapplicable, and you have the essential, binding, contents of the Torah.<sup>3</sup>

1. *Toroth*. The historically-revealed ideas concerning God, the world, the mission of mankind and Israel, not as mere doctrines of faith or knowledge, but as principles, to be acknowledged by heart and mind, and to be realized in daily living.

2. *Mishpatim*. Statements concerning justice toward creatures similar and equal to yourself, by reason of this resemblance and equality; that is, of justice toward human beings.

3. *Chukkim*. Statements concerning justice toward subordinate creatures by reason of the obedience due to God; that is, justice toward the earth, plants and animals, or, if they have become assimilated to your own person, then, justice toward your own property, toward your own body and soul and spirit.

4. *Mitzvoth*. Precepts concerning love toward all living things without distinction, purely because it is the bidding of God, and in consideration of our duty as men and Israelites.

5. *Edoth*. Memorials or testimonies to truths essential to the concept of the mission of man and of Israel. These testimonies comprise symbolic words or acts which bear lessons of profound significance for the individual Jew, for Israel as a whole, and for mankind in general.

6. *Avodah*. Exaltation and sanctification of spiritual life by symbolic words or acts, to the end that our conception

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of our task may be rendered clearer, and we be better fitted to fulfill our mission on earth.

Thus we have, as basic principles for these major classifications, three fundamental concepts; namely justice, love and education.

1) Justice; that is, consideration for everything as a creature of God, regard of every possession as willed by God's decree, and the viewing of every system of law and order as having been ordained by God; and the fulfillment of all the claims each has upon us.

2) Love; that is, the kindly acceptance of all living things as children of God, as brethren; the promotion of their welfare, and the endeavor to bring them to the goal set for them by God, all without motive of personal advancement, but simply in fulfillment of Divine will and command.

3) Education; that is, the training of oneself and others for such endeavors, by taking to heart these truths as principles of life, by holding them fast and preserving them for oneself and for others, and by endeavoring to reclaim them whenever the influences of worldly life have wrested them from our possession.

Let us now go through them, in detail and endeavor to comprehend each in the light of the principles upon which it is established.



### *Eleventh Letter*

## TOROTH, MISHPATIM, CHUKKIM (Laws, Judgments, Statutes)

**T**OROTH. THESE TEACH US to take our hearts to the historically-revealed manifestations of Divine truth and adopt them as principles of life; i.e. the concept of God as our God, that is, as the guide of our thoughts, our feelings, words and actions — as the motivating force of all our lives.<sup>1</sup> They teach us to know God in His unity, summoning us to comprehend every aspect of our lives, and to unite all our faculties, means and circumstances in subordination to the One.<sup>2</sup> They teach the duty of active service of God incumbent upon all living things, including man, who must learn to look upon himself as one of the hosts of ministering attendants of Deity and willingly join their ranks.<sup>3</sup> It is for this purpose that His will is revealed, immutable throughout the ages.<sup>4</sup> We are to utilize our own experiences as part of our training for this purpose.<sup>5</sup> The fear of God is to be taught us through the recognition of His greatness which we shall have thus obtained. We are to fathom the love of God through the consideration of His unending mercy and kindness, and to gain unshakeable trust in Him by contemplating His eternal faithfulness.<sup>6</sup> They bid us ennoble our inner character so that it may become pure and free from all that might drag us down from the high pinnacle of our sacred mission.<sup>7</sup> They bid us put aside pride and greed.<sup>8</sup> They teach us to respond with compassion to the joy and sorrow of all living things, and to embrace them all in our love because they are the children of our God.<sup>9</sup> His commandments are revealed as

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concepts, not simply as incomprehensible behests; whosoever desires truth, let him accept them!

*Mishpatim.* All these ideal theories have value only, however, if you really live in a Divine world, with Divine powers, o Man-Israel. The first prerequisite is justice! Respect every living thing about you and everything that is within yourself as the creation of your God. Cede willingly to each that which it is justly entitled to call its own. Particularly, honor every human being as your equal, honor him, his invisible personality, by honoring his bodily envelope and his life.<sup>10</sup> Extend the same regard to his property, that artificial extension of his body,<sup>11</sup> to the demands which he may be entitled to make of you for transfers of property and physical services,<sup>12</sup> in quality and quantity,<sup>13</sup> in recompense for injury to his person or property.<sup>14</sup> Have regard also, for his right to honest dealings,<sup>15</sup> to liberty, happiness and peace of mind,<sup>16</sup> to honor and tranquility.<sup>17</sup> Never exploit the weaknesses of his heart, his mind or his body.<sup>18</sup> Never abuse your legal power over him.<sup>19</sup>

*Chukkim.* The same regard which you show to man you must also demonstrate to every lower creature, to the earth which bears and sustains all, to the world of plants and animals, to your own body, to your own mental faculties, to your own self, which, more than anything else, you call your own. It is the same justice which you owe to other human beings. That which, in the case of the *Mishpatim*, follows from the concept of identical personality, follows in this case from the fundamental idea of common subordination to God Who defends against your caprice all that which is lower in order and subject to you. Your

duties toward mankind are clearer to you simply because you need only think of yourself, of your own views and feelings in order to recognize, and sympathize with the needs of your fellow-men. If you could put yourself so completely also in the place of other beings, if you could also understand your body and spirit and the conditions governing their collaboration, then you would find it as easy to grasp the *Chukkim* as it was for you to comprehend the *Mishpatim*. They ask of you to regard all living things as God's property. Destroy none; abuse none; waste nothing; employ all things wisely.<sup>20</sup> Regard the species of plants and animals as part of God's world order; do not commingle them.<sup>21</sup> Look upon all creatures as servants in the household of Creation.<sup>22</sup> Have regard for the feelings and urges even of beasts<sup>23</sup> and respect the human body even after the soul has departed.<sup>24</sup> Respect your own body and preserve it as the vessel, messenger and instrument of the spirit.<sup>25</sup> Limit and subject also your own drives and animal acts under the Law of God, so that they, too, be used in a manner purely human and sacred for the upbuilding of the sacred purpose of mankind, so that you may not sink to the low level of the beast.<sup>26</sup> Have respect for the spiritual part of your being when you nourish your body, so that you will give it only such nourishment as will enable it to be a pure, obedient messenger of the world to the spirit, of the spirit to the world, but not such as will produce sluggishness or sensuousness.<sup>27</sup> Therefore, rather than over-estimating and paying undue regard to the animal part of your being, you will conceal and ennoble it, so that, in the end, the beast in you, too, shall become truly human.<sup>28</sup> Finally, the *Chukkim* demand that you give due respect to your world, the purest expression of your personality.<sup>29</sup>

## *Twelfth Letter*

### MITZVOTH — COMMANDMENTS

**M**ITZVOTH. THE SECOND REQUIREMENT, which gives life its completion and perfection, is love. Never be the instrument of a curse or misfortune to yourself or to your neighbor; strive, instead, in emulation of the Deity, to do all your deeds in love, and thus become a blessing to yourself and to your surroundings.<sup>1</sup> First, become a blessing to yourself so that you may become a blessing to others. Seek to equip yourself with all the means and capacities which can be of service to the welfare of your fellow-creatures. Enrich yourself with an abundant store of good and noble principles, and then give yourself entirely to the world about you in the perfect, blessed service of God. In order to become an instrument of blessing, learn first to honor your parents as messengers to you of God, mankind and Israel;<sup>2</sup> learn also to revere wisdom, age and virtue as guides and models, wherever and whenever they appear incarnate in the human character.<sup>3</sup> Enlighten yourself with the Torah's wisdom of life.<sup>4</sup> Flee the example of evil and attach yourself to the good, in order to become good yourself,<sup>5</sup> and constantly train yourself to lift yourself up to God and to return to Him and to your calling.<sup>6</sup> Also strive to transform the earth into a dwelling place for truly human beings, and its creatures into truly human possessions, in order that, in addition to your spiritual resources, you may also acquire material wealth as a means for carrying out your mission of blessing, and in order to be able independ-

ently to establish a home, as a Temple in which youthful scions of Adam's race will be reared as ideal human beings, ideal Israelites.<sup>7</sup> For this purpose, and to grace such a home, take a wife and bring her into your home.<sup>8</sup>

Your mission, however, is not limited by the walls of your house; beyond their limits you must assist with every particle of your strength wherever it is necessary to save the life, the property or the happiness of a human being.<sup>9</sup> You must assist the enterprises of a fellow-human with your own strength and fortune,<sup>10</sup> and you are to help suffering creatures of the lower order<sup>11</sup> wherever you can, by the use of your wealth, your physical or intellectual strength or your word. You must support the needy, clothe the naked, feed the hungry, console the mourners, heal the sick, care for those not provided for, advise those in need of counsel, teach the ignorant, reconcile those sundered by anger and quarrel—in one word, be a blessing whenever and wherever you can.<sup>12</sup>

And not only must you yourself fulfill these requirements. You must see to it, also, that the sources be preserved from which you, your contemporaries and posterity may gather enlightenment and incentive for such a life and such endeavors—you *must preserve the Torah*.<sup>13</sup> Nor should you remain isolated. Attach yourself to a community, by which alone your endeavors can be made universal and eternal in their results; join the congregation<sup>14</sup> on one hand, and the state, which harbors and protects you,<sup>15</sup> on the other. Living thus, you will contribute your share to the *sanctification of the Name of God*. You will become a monument and witness to the sway of God and the duty of man. Your Israelite and your non-Israelite brethren as

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well will derive enlightenment and courage from your example. They will learn to serve the One God as their God, and to love Him with all their hearts, with all their souls, and with all their might. Thus, individually, you will be in your own small sphere that which it is the mission of your people to be to the world at large.<sup>16</sup>

### Thirteenth Letter

#### EDOTH—SYMBOLIC WORDS AND ACTS

**E**DOTH. HOWEVER, THE MERE ACKNOWLEDGEMENT of the essential principles of life does not suffice for the building up of a life of such endeavors in righteousness and love. There is need, in addition thereto, of symbolic words and acts which shall stamp them indelibly upon your soul, and thus preserve them for you and for others. If a truth is to produce results, it must be impressed upon the heart and mind repeatedly and emphatically. This is the essential concept at the basis of the *Edoth*. The symbols are chiefly those of acts, of practices which serve as signs of an idea. Thus the doctrine that God is the creator and possessor of all, that all is His, that man is the administrator according to God's will and Israel the teacher of the law of mankind's mission, is symbolized in the commandments concerning *bechor*, the sanctity of the first-born, *chalah*—the offering of the prescribed portion of dough, *orlah*—the prohibition of the use of immature fruit, *chadash*—the prohibition of the use of new grain prior to the offering of the prescribed measure of barley, *Shabbath*—the Sabbath. With specific reference to Israel's holy soil, there are the laws of *shemittah* and *yovel*—the Sabbatical and Jubilee years, *terumah*—the heave-offering, and *bikkurim*—the offering of the first ripe fruits.

The doctrine that God is the Redeemer and Savior of Israel, is symbolized by *Pessach*—the Passover festival, *Shevuoth*—the Feast of Weeks, *Succoth*—the Feast of

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Tabernacles, and *Shemini Atzereth* — the Eighth Day of Solemn Assembly. The fact that God is to us in exile what He was to our ancestors in the Holy Land is symbolized by *Channukah* — the Memorial of the Re-dedication of the Temple, and by *Purim* — the Memorial of the Deliverance from Haman. Acknowledgment that the body can have meaning only through the spirit and freedom only through law is symbolized in the *Sefirah*, the counting of the days between Passover and the Feast of Weeks. Consideration of the causes of our exile and the warning to shun the sins which have led thereto are taught by the *Taaniot* — fast days. To keep even the body and its organs pure and holy, and to shun everything that leads to bestiality is taught by *milah* — circumcision. To dedicate all the powers of our mind, heart and body to the service of the All-One is the lesson of *Tefillin* — the phylacteries. To be reminders of the presence of the Unseen One and of His revelation in the past, of the limitation of sensuality as a weapon for battle against evil — this constitutes the purpose of the *Tzitzith* — the show-threads. Consecration of the Jewish home as a sanctuary of God and of the Jewish life therein as a perpetual service of God, is the aim of the *mezuzah*, the sacred inscription on the door posts. Recognition of the "Jacob-like" element in Israel's calling; that is, of the lack of external might and independence, as a requirement of a truly spiritual conception of the mission of Israel to teach the revelation of God, is symbolized in the *Matzoh* — the bread of affliction, and in *gid ha-nasheh* — the prohibition of the sinew of the hip that was lamed.

The *lulav*, the palm branch, and the *Succah*, the booth, both symbols of the Succoth festival, are intended to teach



us the wise appreciation and use of our property, so that we may neither scorn nor worship what we possess. The same lesson is taught us with respect to the land of Israel by *Maasoroth*, the tithe offering. Finally, *Rosh Ha-Shanah* and *Yom Kippur*, the New Year and the Day of Atonement, *Shofar* and *Rosh Chodesh*, the stirring blast of the ram's horn and the ritual of the New Moon<sup>1</sup>, are to remind us to test our own lives by the basic axiom that God is the King, Judge and Father of us all. We are to realize that, by not fulfilling our life's calling in its entirety, we forfeit our claim to life and existence, and that we must endeavor to raise ourselves up once more to a purer, better future. These symbolic acts and seasons all give expression to ideas, without splitting them up into words as speech must. They come to the mind each a unit, like thought itself, even as the resolve which they should serve to generate. They present themselves with all the force of a single, undivided and indivisible appeal to the soul. Therefore they are appropriate vehicles to convey the sentiments of one united nation pervaded with one thought, actuated by one resolve, and are intelligible beyond the confines of the Israelite nation. Every single detail of action or omission in the *Edoth* division of the Law is a written note, a word, a sermon addressed to the reverent soul. They are, all of them, reminders, or vivid expressions of sentiment by means of the significant language of action. The greatest and the least among them, even the one that is the target of so much ridicule, the prohibition of the use of an egg laid on a Sabbath or holiday, are all symbols that teach important lessons. The strict attention paid to so-called trifles is no more worthy of ridicule and no less reasonable

than the care you exercise to use a clear and intelligible language or a neat and legible handwriting.

Take, for example, the law of the Sabbath, with its prohibition of *M'lachah*, of a specified number of acts classed as "labor." The day upon which the newly-created world first lay spread out in its completeness before man that he might possess it and rule over it, this day was to be to him an eternal testimony of the great truth that all things around him were the property of God, the Creator. He was to realize that it was God Who had conferred upon him the power and the right to rule the world, in order that he should administer his trust as the property of God and in accordance with His supreme will. In order to keep this idea ever fresh and vivid in his mind, he should refrain on this day from exercising his human authority over the things on earth. He should not place his hand upon any object for the purpose of exercising dominion over it; that is, for employing it for any purpose of his own. He must, as it were, return the borrowed world to its Divine Owner in order to realize that it is only lent to him. Therefore the type of labor forbidden on the Sabbath is chiefly *Melecheth Machsheveth*, that is, *productive* activity, executed consciously, with a purpose and proper means, in order to obtain a certain result. It must be an action, therefore, which is the outcome of human will and conscious force, not *Kilkul* — "an act which produces no desired result," *Mith'asek* — "Occupation without purpose," *She-eno Mithchaven* — "unintentional work," *She-eno tz'richa legufah* — "in itself unnecessary," *Ke-le-achar yad* — "indirectly performed," or not in *Sheur* — "in proper measure and proportion."

Do you not see, then, that every moment of the Sabbath that you restrain your hand from labor, you proclaim God as the sole Creator and Master and yourself as His servant? Do you not see, then, that even the slightest, least arduous productive activity on the Sabbath implies the denial of God as Creator and Lord, and the usurpation on your part of the Throne of God? The desecration of the Sabbath is therefore equivalent to the blunt rejection and negation of the mission of Israel. Do you not recognize that the Sabbath is *B'rith*, "a covenant," and *Zikaron*, "a sacred memorial," and *Oth*, "an instructive sign?" It is *kodesh*, a sacred day which was not instituted that man may rest after the labors of the week which is past, but that he may consecrate himself to the task of the week which is to come.

And so, in like manner, every ordinance falling into the category of *Edoth* is of equal importance, with the proper distinction drawn between *de-oraita* — the plain word of the Scripture, and *de-rabbanan* — those ordinances established by Rabbinical interpretation.

## *Fourteenth Letter*

### AVODAH — THE SERVICE OF GOD

THE LAST DIVISION OF THE SACRED LAW, *Avodah*, now remains for our consideration.

*Avodah*, the service of God, entails a turning aside from the activities of day-to-day existence, a striving to regain the eternal values of life if we should have lost sight of them through the deceptions, errors, conflicts and temptations of living. Our sages call true devotion *Avodath ha-lev* — "the service of the heart;" that is, the fulfillment of God's will toward our own inner person by purifying and ennobling our character.

*Tefillah* means the attainment of the proper perspective concerning our own personality and our duties toward God, the world, and mankind. In former days the sacrificial rite was the symbolical expression of our service of God; its ordinances and ceremonies were of profound symbolic significance. The Temple, the dwelling-place of the Torah, of Israel's most sacred possession, taught the lesson that the Law was God's gift to Israel (*Aron*), and that it was for the fulfillment thereof that God had given man both body and mind (*Shulchan* and *Menorah*). Each of the sacrifices teaches its own individual meaning, the renunciation of sensuality,<sup>1</sup> of selfishness,<sup>2</sup> the consecration of life,<sup>3</sup> of the emotions,<sup>4</sup> of one's entire personality<sup>5</sup> to God for the fulfillment of His Law. Some of them typify the endeavor to consecrate oneself to God through the Torah,<sup>6</sup> others the effort to regain the lost purity of life

by the renunciation of sensuality and selfishness, equivalent to a return to the Law;<sup>7</sup> others again, the recognition of God as the Giver of the great good things of life or the Preserver of our peace and happiness.<sup>8</sup> This recognition of the Divine benevolence must be complete, sincere, and free from every material and sensual consideration. Our gratitude must be extended to Him because He has given us so much which we can consecrate to the fulfillment of His holy will as revealed in the Torah.

These symbolic actions were all accompanied by the living word. (See Maimonides, *Hilchoth Temidim*, Chapter VI). The Temple has sunk into ruins, but the living word of worship and instruction remains, more complete even than in former times, because it must now also take the place of the symbolic sacrificial rites. The aim of our worship — *Tefillah*, derived from *hithpallel* — is the purification, enlightenment and uplifting of our inner selves to the recognition of the Divine truth. Its aim is not simply to stir up the emotions, or to produce fleeting moments of devotion, empty sentimentalism and idle tears, but the cleansing of heart and mind.

Life robs us of the correct judgment concerning God, the world, man, and Israel, and concerning our own relationship to them all. Leaving the disturbing influences of life, and turning to God, you can find it again through the contemplation that is part of *Tefillah*. All the various component parts of worship serve this great purpose. There are *Tehilloth*, the psalms or praises; they show us God as He is revealed in nature, in the world of man and in Israel, and *Tefilloth*, the prayers or devotions, which help us evaluate our own personalities and our role in this world

on the basis of these concepts. There are *Todoth*, prayers of thanksgiving, and *Bekashoth*, supplications, which express our full and unreserved acknowledgment that everything past or future proceeds from His hands, and the acknowledgment of the errors and failings of our own lives. The *Techinoth* express our struggle to rise up once more from the depths of our weaknesses and backslidings. The foundation and basis upon which all this edifice of worship is raised is the *Keriath Hatorah*, the Reading of the Law, which imparts to us the instruction and wisdom which we require. Its utmost summit and goal, the perfect fruit of our piety, are the *Berachoth*, benedictions, the firm resolutions to promote the fulfillment of God's will in the midst of everyday, active life. Retain these sketchy outlines in your mind, and, bearing them in memory, contemplate afresh our prayers, our Divine service as a whole, and see if you do not find it more dignified, meaningful and important than you had ever before imagined.

*Shools* — "schools," that is what we call our houses of worship, and that is what they should be, schools for the adult, for those who have long since exchanged the lessons of the classroom for the problems of life.

And now, my dear Benjamin, consider this: Here we have a law which bids us recognize God in the world and in mankind, which teaches that the fulfillment of His will is our mission, which shows Him to us as the Father of all living things, and every living thing as our brother-creature. It is a law which makes all our life a means of serving God through the practice of righteousness and love toward all living things, and a proclamation of these truths for both ourselves and others. Can this be a law which

stunts the mind and the heart, inhibits every joy of life and turns men into brooding monks? Can it be that the study of this law, when pursued earnestly and intelligently, perverts and deadens the mind, narrows or restricts the impulses of the heart?

Its true description is found in the words of the sweet singer of Israel:

*"True, the heavens declare themselves  
Revelation of God's glory;  
The thin sheet of space,  
That it is His handiwork.  
True, day to day proclaims  
That God has spoken;  
Night after night revives  
The thoughts of Deity.  
No speech we need,  
No words are spoken,  
The voice is heard without them.  
Through all the earth their voice goes forth,  
To the end of the earthly world their words;  
In them He has set the tent of the sun,  
So that, like a bridegroom, it may leave its canopy,  
And rejoice, as if it were allmighty, to run its course;  
And yet, fixed in heaven is its issue,  
Its circuit reaches ever the same end,  
And thus it is before the sun of God, before which  
none is hidden.*

*But only the Law of God is complete,  
Giving answer to the inquiring soul;  
The testimony of the Lord alone is faithful,  
Giving wisdom to the unlearned;*

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*The ordinances of the Lord are righteous,  
Giving joy to the heart;  
The commands of the Lord are clear,  
Giving light to the eyes;  
The fear of the Lord is pure,  
And therefore endures forever.  
The judgments of the Lord are true,  
They are justice altogether;  
Desirable more than gold and much ornament,  
Sweeter than honey and dripping comb.  
O that Thy servant, too, might be illumined by them!  
If he keep them, how great the path of life.*

(Psalm 19)



## *Fifteenth Letter*

### ANSWER

**Y**OU TELL ME, MY DEAR BENJAMIN, that you have taken as your motto the utterance of the Psalmist, "O that Thy servant, too, might be illumined by them . . ." You have vowed not to rest until you will have attained this inner light. You will not establish your home until you have added to your rich store of material possessions the spiritual treasures of the Torah, in order that you may be able to use your possessions worthily and in accordance with the will of God, and in order that you may be able to set up your home in the spirit of Torah for Israel-mankind.

These your words are to me proof and guarantee that I have not written in vain.

It was but natural that you found your Judaism in contradiction to your own conception of the purpose of human existence, inasmuch as your conception was one which Judaism rejects and against whose baser tendencies, the desire for pleasure and the deification of material wealth, it wages unceasing warfare.

These baser tendencies in the materialistic view of the world are somewhat refined and spiritualized by the higher intellects of that philosophy, but these thinkers have made no attempt to renounce them in their entirety. The essential notion of this system is either that of a world without an active God, or of a God without a world at His service. Judaism takes a different, and higher view, and views even the highest and the best as means only to that higher end.

Doubtless you now comprehend our national catastrophes as the products of our shortcomings as a nation, failings which, however, do not place us below the standard of the other nations as regards righteousness. Israel never committed a sin of which the other nations of the world had not also been guilty. But the standard applied to Israel was a higher one; what Deity readily pardons in the case of others, He would not forgive us. The destruction of Israel's state, which had fallen short of its high ideals, had to be the direct consequence of these sins; it was part of the Divine plan for the course of Israel's career.

*'And God punished in his case the sin of which we all have been guilty'*

Israel's material weakness and poverty in worldly goods and pleasures seem to you now a part of the scheme of its God-revealing existence. You realize that the apparent humbleness of the nation's lot did not affect its mission nor diminish its greatness. It simply exchanged one kind of greatness for another, and dispersion opened for it a new and broader field for the fulfillment of its mission.

As for the Law, is it really a brake on all the joys of life, a hindrance denying the gratification of the natural human craving for pleasure? Do examine the precepts and ordinances of the Law from beginning to end and tell me what legitimate desire it forbids to gratify, what natural impulse it would destroy or extirpate.

Quite the contrary, it ennobles and sanctifies even our animal impulses and desires by applying them with prudence to the purposes designated by the Creator. Righteousness is the Law's basic character. The gratification of physical lust and passion is not, and has never been, its goal.

Therefore man's lower cravings are subordinated to a higher law and limited by the Creator's wisdom for His own infinitely wise purposes. Yet, as means for attaining ends that are proper and necessary, the Law recognizes these desires as perfectly moral, pure and human, and their gratification as just and as legitimate as the fulfillment of any other human task or mission.

What the Law firmly and unyieldingly opposes, on the other hand, is the deification of wealth and physical enjoyment as the sole aim and controlling impulse of our lives. However, it not only permits their pursuit within the limits set by Divine wisdom, but, in fact, declares the effort to attain them a duty as sacred and binding as any other human obligation, and condemns the purposeless and unreasonable abstinence from permitted enjoyments as sin.<sup>1</sup> How could it be different? Is it conceivable that God would bestow upon man any power or capacity and then, by utter prohibition of its use, legally annihilate it? It is the highest and truest form of worship to be "joyous before the Lord," to pass one's life in gladsome serenity of spirit, because we are aware of the fact that we live under the eye of God and that His protecting hand is ever outstretched to guide and guard us in every danger and trial; to think and feel, to speak and work, to enjoy and to endure.

Has this people furnished no contribution to the great edifice of human civilization? I shall not ask whether any of the other peoples ever consciously did anything with a view to the furtherance of universal human happiness. I shall not ask whether they did not all seek only their own welfare, nor whether they ever performed any deed of universal value except unconsciously, as blind instruments in

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the hand of God. But I shall, indeed, challenge the world to deny that Israel, deliberately and at the sacrifice of its own earthly well-being, saved as a palladium from the shipwreck of its fortunes the only thing through which science, culture, art and inventive skill could become the means of bringing true blessing and salvation to the world. Is there any truer greatness for men than to be bearers of revealed instruction concerning God and the calling of mankind, or than to show by example and life that there are higher things than wealth and pleasure, than science and culture, to which all these worldly achievements should be but subordinate means of fulfillment?

Does not this Law separate its adherents from the rest of mankind? Of course it does, but had it not done so, Israel would long since have ceased to be itself. Consider what struggles the preservation of the true spirit of Israel in our midst requires, even despite this separation. But is this isolation because of hostility, or for the sake of pride? Indeed it is not. For is not God the God of all living things, of all men? The fact is that Israel in particular has the task to recognize and worship as its own God that One God Who has called and trained *all* of mankind for His service. Is it not Israel's unceasing duty, through the example of its own life and history, to proclaim Him as the Universal Lord and Sovereign?

The Bible terms Israel *segulah*, "a chosen treasure." This designation, however, does not imply, as some have falsely interpreted it, that Israel has a monopoly on God's love and favor. On the contrary, it proclaims that God has the sole and exclusive claim to Israel's devotion and service; that Israel may not render Divine homage to any other

Being.<sup>2</sup> Israel's most cherished ideal is that of the universal brotherhood of mankind. Almost every page of the prayers we utter contains reference to the hastening of this end. All of us are helping to rear a great edifice, Divinely ordained for the well-being of man. To this end are dedicated all the nations that were or are anywhere upon the surface of the earth, whether in the east or in the west, the north or the south, each with its life and its exit from the proscenium of history, with its successes and failures, with its virtues and vices, its wisdom and its folly, its rise and its fall — with whatsoever it leaves to posterity as the sum total of the results and products of its existence.

All of these efforts and accomplishments are building bricks contributed by all the nations to the one edifice of human history; all tend to the execution of the plan of the One, Same God.<sup>3</sup>

Is the spirit crushed and degraded by the absolute devotion which this Law requires? Let me ask you, "Whom do you respect more, who is really the stronger? Is it the downtrodden Jew, who in the dust of humiliation possesses enough strength of mind and character to pity his opponent and to accept the scorn heaped upon him as a trial sent by God and as a part of the destiny of his nation? Or is it the ruffian who, in his overweening arrogance, abuses the weakness of his fellow-man and finds therein his claim to greatness?"

Do not say that this conception of God, the world and humanity inhibits the progress of science and art. Of course, ever since men began to forget the All-One and to deify His creatures, even to worship their own animal impulses which they felt to be all-powerful, and to glorify them in

symbols of stone, so that every idol became a sad memento of human degradation, since then, of course, Judaism interdicts the making and possession of such images. For to Judaism, truth is more important than art. So, too, certainly no artist inspired with the true spirit of Judaism would take the chisel, the brush or the pencil in his hand to form a work of art suited only to stir up impure thoughts and to rouse only the animal in man. For, if such productions of art were to be deemed useful and proper, then morality and virtue would be mere empty words and not, as we conceive them to be, the standard by which to measure our every act.

You speak of "dogmas," "articles of faith." In answer, I would briefly say that Judaism enjoins six hundred and thirteen *duties*, but it knows of no *dogmas*. The sublime truths which lie at its basis are revealed as axioms, clearly intelligible to all who have ears to hear and minds to understand. Judaism bestirs us to the endeavor to understand the world, man, human history and God's plan as it operates in the development of them all. In this effort, personal study and thought, universal human experience and the Torah are to be utilized alike, for the latter is as real and actual a source of instruction as the two former. True speculation does not consist, as many would-be thinkers suppose, in closing the eye and the ear to the world round about us and in constructing out of our own inner Ego a world to suit ourselves. True speculation takes nature, man and history as given facts, as the basis for knowledge, and seeks in them instruction and wisdom. To these Judaism adds the Torah, as genuine a reality as heaven or earth. But it accepts no speculation which does not lead to active,

productive life as its ultimate goal. It points out the limits of our understanding and warns us against baseless reasoning, transcending the legitimate bounds of our intellectual capacity, however brilliantly put together and glitteringly logical it may appear to be. For all such intellectual pyrotechnics are, after all, but puerile sport, useful chiefly to still the scruples of a sensual nature, oblivious alike to the limitations and the ideals of humanity.

To be sure, the spirit predominant in the most recent form of Jewish education was chiefly devoted to abstract and abstruse speculation. A vivid awareness of the real world was lacking, and therefore study was not conducted with a view to application in life, or to the acquisition of understanding for the world and our duty. Study became the end instead of the means, while the actual subject of the investigation became a matter of indifference. People studied Judaism but forgot to search for its principles in the pages of Scripture. That method, however, is not truly Jewish. Our great masters have always protested against it. Many pages of the classic works of Jewish literature are filled with the objections of their authors to this false and perverted procedure. The Bible and the Talmud are to be studied with one sole object in view, namely, to ascertain the duties of life which they teach, *lil'mod ul'lamed, lish'mor velaasoth*, "to learn and to teach, to observe and to do." There is no science which trains the mind to a broader and more practical view of things than does the Torah, pursued in this manner. The Law, which lays down reverence, love and faithfulness as its three foundation stones, does not cripple the heart. When comprehended and accepted by the mind, its fulfillment becomes a new power,

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a life from within, a force actually stimulating all the faculties to a freer development and ever more intensive application.

"*Chassid*" — "pious one" — what a glorious name, but how grievously misunderstood and tainted through ignorant or malicious misconception from without! The true *Chassid* is one who devotes himself in love entirely to the service of the Higher Power, who does not seek anything for himself, but relinquishes his own claims upon the world in order that he may live more actively and carry out more thoroughly works of loving-kindness for the world. He does not withdraw from the midst of the world, but lives in it, with it and for it. For himself the *Chassid* seeks nothing; for the world, everything. Accordingly, David, who labored from his earliest youth, continuously and exclusively, for the spiritual and material well-being of his people, and who left the reparation of the injury done him by Saul and the disposal of his own affairs to the wisdom of Deity alone, indeed deserves to be called a *Chassid*. You know the Rabbinical definition of the term "*she-lach she-lach she-li she-lach, chassid*" "he who says, 'that which is thine is thine, and that which is mine is also thine,' is a *Chassid*." But a life of seclusion devoted only to meditation and prayer is not Judaism. Study and worship are but paths which lead to action. "*Talmud gadol she-mevi li-de maaseh*" "Great is study, for it leads to the practical fulfillment of the precepts," say our sages, and the flower and fruit of our devotions (*Tefilloth*) should be (*B'rachoth*) the resolve to lead a life of action, pervaded with the spirit of God. Such a life is the only universal goal.

But what about the difficulties involved in obeying this



law in our own day — the trouble which it causes us while travelling, in our relationships with non-Jews, and in business? For the sake of argument, let us admit that all the complaints concerning the difficulty and trouble involved in obeying Jewish law are based on fact. But if our view of life is earnest and serious, if we comprehend Judaism as the charge with which we are entrusted and which we are to bear through all the changes of time, if we realize that it is our life's code of duty, can the difficulty, the burdensomeness of such an obligation dispense us from its fulfillment? Should it not rather make the duty of fulfillment all the more solemn and urgent?

But let us now examine the alleged difficulties more closely, whether, when viewed from the standpoint of the spirit of Judaism, they might not disappear altogether. Let us first take up the last of the problems that you mentioned; namely, business.

Do you really think that you cannot fulfill the Law because it commands you to cease doing business during one-seventh of your time, in order that you should thereby manifest your conviction that God is the Source of your strength, and that you derive from Him alone your right to possess His world? Do you really deem yourself unable to obey the Law because it asks you to reserve another seventeenth of your time not for the ordinary tasks of daily existence, but to lead your thoughts again to your mission as an Israelite, and to strengthen you to fulfill properly your nation's allotted task on earth?

Son of this day and age, do you not blush to voice such a complaint? Certainly, if you consider yourself born only to possess and to enjoy; if the quantity and extent of

your wealth and enjoyments are for you the measure of your importance; if you look upon these things not as a means but as ends in themselves — that would be quite a different matter. If you think that your business activity is essentially different from that of the farmer, who can do no more than place the seed in the earth, and must look to the blessing of God's sun and God's rain to ripen and develop it; if you believe that your strength and the power of your own hand can raise the edifice of your prosperity to its summit of perfection — not God, but you alone — and that all other considerations must yield to this one ambition, then — then — of course . . .

But this is not the spirit of Judaism. Try to comprehend the Sabbath and its beautiful ideal lessons. Try to realize that, in it and through it, there are given to you at once the basis of your earthly task, and its sublimest, most spiritual fulfillment. Try to understand that the Sabbath proclaims you a witness that there is a God, *one* God, and that man is created for His service. On the other hand, reflect on all the insane monstrosity of the thought of "desecrating the Sabbath for the sake of gain." "In order to gain my daily bread or to increase my wealth, that I may possess the means better to fulfill my duties to God, I deny that there is a God to Whom belongs the world and the fullness thereof. I deny that life and its blessings come from Him. I affirm that wealth and the pursuit of pleasure are my only purpose, the fulfillment of my own will my only object. I negate both God and the mission of humanity . . ." Surely these reflections should cause you to lower again the hand which greed for gain had raised to desecrate the Sabbath.

Yes, if you would but contemplate your life in the spirit of the Sabbath, if you would but one single moment see yourself as viewed by the eternal gaze of God, as the Sabbath teaches that you are; if you would comprehend yourself as vivified by God, in a God-filled world the totality of whose life is directed by God, would your thinking still follow the same line? If you would sense that you are a child and servant of the All-One, that all of your existence is dependent upon the will of the One and Only Lord and Father, that every breath is His gift, every faculty His decree, every event in your history His doing, that you are His servant, and your whole life is the fulfillment of His commandments — would you then still understand your present complaint? You would then realize that your longing to possess is but one of your duties, and essentially the same as any of the others. You would then esteem your wealth not in accordance with the amount of property that you have acquired but in accordance with the degree of compliance with God's commandments you have observed in accumulating it, as well as in its use and application. You would understand that though the six days bring you the material means for fulfilling your mission, the seventh alone can afford you the spiritual means, the spiritual power and consecration to that end. You would realize that these blessed results can only be attained if both gain and disposal are in accordance with Divine precept. You would see that since it is God Who has given you the power to earn, and blessing in the accumulation of wealth, He is also rich and strong enough to shower upon your dwelling so much manna in six days that you would want for nothing on the seventh. Then you would feel, not that, because of your

complaint, you ceased to be a Jew, but that you must have ceased to be a Jew, in the only true and real sense, *before* you could ever have uttered such a complaint.

"But what about our relationships with non-Jews? We make ourselves so conspicuous. They know immediately that we are Jews!" O son of this day and age, who tells you to deny or conceal the fact that you are a Jew? Be a Jew; really and truly so. Endeavor to attain to the ideal of the true Jew in fulfillment of the law of justice, righteousness and love, then you will be respected, not in spite of the fact that you are a Jew, but *because* you are one. Conceive of yourself as a Jew, and disseminate that realization by word and deed among your non-Jewish brethren, and you will have no reason to complain that your Judaism cannot travel incognito.

"But we cannot become truly intimate with them, truly friendly, if we do not, at least, eat and drink with them at their social gatherings!" Again, I would say to you, practice righteousness and love as your Torah bids you do. Be just in deed, truthful in your speech, bear love in your heart for your non-Jewish brother, as your Law teaches you. Feed his hungry, clothe his naked, console his mourners, restore his sick, help his helpless, assist him with counsel and deed in time of need and sorrow — unfold the whole noble breadth of your Israeldom. Can you think that he will not then respect and love you, or that there will not result as great a degree of social intimacy as your life can concede?

But you would want still more: the right to become a member of his family? Do you not see that, until the advent of the age of universal brotherhood, you should not, and

cannot, desire that? Not on account of any enmity or hostility, but because of your mission as an Israelite. You cannot be angry with the Law if it forbids you to marry outside of Israel, because you should rear your children, those precious pledges of God's love, solely for His Torah. It would mean to lead them away from the Torah if you were not to give them an Israelite father, or would give them other than an Israelite mother. You must be grateful, therefore, to the Law that it seeks to prevent the sons of Israel from forming amorous attachments to non-Israelite daughters, and the daughters of Israel from becoming involved with non-Israelite sons.

Try to understand the object of your life, comprehend the duty of Israel, and all the alleged difficulties of upholding Judaism will disappear as a thin mist. For they are felt so keenly in our time only because the true Israelite spirit has vanished, or else because Israel's sons neither know nor respect themselves.

## Sixteenth Letter

### EMANCIPATION

YOU ASK ME FOR MY OPINION on the question which at present so greatly agitates the minds of men; namely emancipation. You wish to know whether I consider it feasible and desirable according to the spirit of Judaism. The new conception of Judaism which you have acquired, dear Benjamin, has rendered you so uncertain as to whether such ideas could be reconciled with the eternal ideals of our faith. You have begun to doubt whether the acceptance of these new relations is in harmony with the spirit of Judaism, inasmuch as it approximates to a close union with that which is different and alien, and a severance of the ties which bind us all to Israel's lot. You doubt its desirability, because, through too much intimacy with the non-Jew, Israel's own special characteristics might easily be obliterated. I respect your scruples, and will communicate to you my own opinion. Let us first examine whether it is in harmony with the spirit of Judaism.

When Israel began its great wandering through the ages and among the nations, Jeremiah proclaimed it as Israel's duty to:

"Build houses and dwell therein; plant gardens and eat the fruit thereof; take wives unto yourselves, and beget sons and daughters, and take wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage that they bear sons and daughters, and that you multiply *there*, and diminish not. *And seek the peace of the city whither I have exiled you, and pray for it to the Lord.*

*for in its peace there will be unto you peace."*

(Jeremiah 29:5-7)

To be pushed back and limited upon the path of life is, therefore, not an essential condition of the *Galuth*, Israel's exile among the nations. On the contrary, it is our duty to join ourselves as closely as possible to the state which receives us into its midst, to promote its welfare and not to consider our own well-being as in any way separate from that of the state to which we belong.

This close connection with states everywhere is not at all in contradiction to the spirit of Judaism, for the independent national life of Israel was never the essence or purpose of our existence as a nation, but only a means of fulfilling our spiritual mission.

Land and soil were never Israel's bond of union. That function was always fulfilled solely by the common task set by the Torah. Therefore the people of Israel still forms a united body, though it is separated from a national soil. Nor does this unity lose any of its reality though Israel accept everywhere the citizenship of the nations among which it is dispersed. This spiritual unity (which may be designated by the Hebrew terms *am* and *goy*, but not by the term "nation," unless we are able to separate from that word the inherent concept of common territory and political power) is the only communal bond we possess, or ever expect to possess, until that great day shall arrive when the Almighty shall see fit in His inscrutable wisdom to unite again His scattered servants in one land, and the Torah shall be the guiding principle of a state, a model of the meaning of Divine Revelation and the mission of humanity.

For this future, which is promised us in the glorious predictions of the inspired prophets as a goal of the *Galuth*, we hope and pray, but actively to accelerate its coming is prohibited to us. The entire purpose of the Messianic age is that we may, in prosperity, exhibit to mankind a better example of "Israel" than did our ancestors the first time, while, hand in hand with us, the entire race will be joined in universal brotherhood through the recognition of God, the All-One.

It is on account of this the purely spiritual nature of its national character that Israel is capable of the most intimate union with states, with, perhaps, this difference. While others seek in the state only the material benefits which it secures, considering possessions and pleasures as the highest good, Israel can regard it only as a means of fulfilling the mission of mankind.

Summon up before your mental vision the picture of such an Israel, dwelling in freedom among the nations, and striving to attain to its ideal. Picture every son of Israel a respected and influential priest of righteousness and love, disseminating among the nations not specific Judaism — for proselytism is forbidden — but pure humanity. What a mighty impulse to progress, what a luminary and staff in the gloomy days of the Middle Ages would Israel have been then, if its own sin and the insanity of the nations had not rendered such a *Galuth* impossible. How impressive, how sublime it would have been if, in the midst of a race that adored only power, possessions and enjoyment, there had lived quietly and publicly human beings of a different sort, who beheld in material possessions only the means for practicing justice and love towards all, a people whose



minds, imbued with the wisdom and truth of the Law, maintained simple, straightforward views, and emphasized them for themselves and others in expressive, vivid symbolic acts.

But it would seem as though Israel first had to be fitted, through the endurance of the harsh and cruel aspects of exile, for proper appreciation and utilization of the milder and gentler aspects of dispersion.

When *Galuth* will be understood and accepted as it should be, when, in suffering, the service of God and His Torah will be understood as the only task of life, when, even in misery, God will be served, and material abundance esteemed only as a means for this service, then, perhaps, Israel will be ready for the far greater temptations of prosperity and happiness in dispersion. Thus the answer to our question is quite obvious. Just as it is our duty to endeavor to obtain those material possessions which are the fundamental condition of life, so also is it the duty of every one to take advantage of every alleviation and improvement of his condition open to him in an honest way. For, the more means, the more opportunity is given to him to fulfill his mission in its broadest sense; and it is the duty of the community no less than that of the individual to obtain for all its members the opportunities and privileges of citizenship and liberty. Do I consider this desirable? I bless emancipation when I see how the excess of oppression drove Israel away from a normal life, limited the free development of its noble character, and compelled many individuals to enter, for the sake of self-preservation, upon paths which they were too weak to refuse to enter.

I bless emancipation when I notice that no spiritual principle, not even one of foolish fanaticism, stands in its

way, but that it is opposed only by those passions which are degrading to humanity, namely, greed for gain and narrow selfishness. I rejoice when I perceive that in this concession of emancipation, regard for the natural rights of men to live as equals among equals is freely extended without force or compulsion, but purely through the power of their own inner truth. I welcome the sacrifice of the base passions wherever it is offered, as the dawn of reviving humanity in mankind, and as a preliminary step to the universal recognition of God as the sole Lord and Father, and of all human beings as the children of the All-One.

But for Israel I only bless it if, at the same time, there will awaken in Israel the true spirit which strives to fulfill the mission of Israel regardless of whether or not there is to be emancipation, to elevate and ennoble ourselves, to implant the spirit of Judaism in our souls, in order that it may generate a life in which that spirit shall be reflected and realized. I bless it, if Israel will regard emancipation not as the goal of its vocation, but only as a new condition of its mission, and as a new test, much severer than the trial of oppression. But I should grieve if Israel understood itself so little, and had so little comprehension of its own spirit that it would welcome emancipation as the end of the *Galuth*, and as the highest goal of its historic mission. If Israel should regard this glorious concession merely as a means of securing a greater degree of comfort in life, and greater opportunities for the acquisition of wealth and enjoyment, it would show that Israel had not comprehended the spirit of its own Law, nor learned anything from exile. And sorrowfully indeed would I mourn if Israel were so far to forget itself as to deem emancipation not too dearly

purchased through capricious curtailment of the Torah, capricious abandonment of the chief element of our very being. We must become Jews, Jews in the true sense of the word, imbued with the spirit of the Law, accepting it as the fountain of spiritual and ethical life. Then Judaism will gladly welcome emancipation as affording a greater opportunity for the fulfillment of its task, the realization of a noble and ideal life.

## *Seventeenth Letter*

### REFORM

**Y**OU ARE RIGHT. The whole question of emancipation, affecting, as it does, only our material state of affairs, possesses only a subordinate interest for Judaism. Sooner or later the nations will decide what attitude they should take in the issue between right and wrong, between humanity and inhumanity. The first awakening of a sentiment nobler than the mere lust for gain and thrills will speedily take effect in the emancipation of the oppressed everywhere and, therefore, also in that of the Jews.

There is another goal before us, the attainment of which depends entirely upon our own efforts; it is the refinement and ennoblement of ourselves, the fulfillment of Judaism by Jews.

This leads to a consideration of the topic which you designate by the term "Reform."

Certainly, dear Benjamin, we are still far from being what we should be. If you compare the ideal of life which the Torah desires us to realize, even according to the scanty outlines which I have drawn for you in these letters, with our actual life as individuals and as a community, you will at once discern how numerous are the steps which we must still take, and how great the distance yet to be climbed before we can reach the glorious summit of our aspiration and our hope. Therefore, let us truly "reform." Yes, let us strive with all our power, with all the good and noble qualities of our character to reach this height of ideal perfection. Reform!

The only object of such "reform," however, must be the fulfillment of Judaism by Jews in our time, the fulfillment of the eternal idea in harmony with the conditions set by the time. It must be the education and progress of time to the high plane of the Torah, not the lowering of the Torah to the level of the age, cutting down the towering summit to the sunken grade of our own lives. We Jews need to be reformed through Judaism itself, newly comprehended by the spirit and fulfilled with the utmost energy. Merely to seek greater ease and comfort in life through the destruction of the eternal code set up for all time by the God of Eternity, is not, and never can be, the "reform" which we need. Judaism seeks to lift us up to its own high plane. We must never attempt to drag it down to our own level.

There you see the evil of our times: ignorance or false views of Judaism, combined with a tendency, penetrating from the world outside into our humble habitations, to look upon enjoyment as the chief aim of living.

Alas! How widespread is the ignorance, how rare the Jew who knows himself, his purpose in life and the meaning of his history! Where are the sons of Israel in whose breasts echo the tones of the harp of David and the words of the Prophets, and whose minds—but, ah, I should be silent concerning the mind!—comprehend the extent of Israel's duty? And how many wrong and pernicious notions exist today concerning the principles, ordinances and teachings of Judaism! Even that which is known superficially, how little is known of its wondrously profound meaning! The *Edoth* duties, for example, so useful and indispensable by virtue of the lessons they teach, are looked upon by

some as a mere mechanical *opus operatum*, or as amulet-like charms for the prevention of physical ailments or the erection of mystic supra-mundane worlds. Others again look upon the most sacred laws of righteousness as matters outside of Judaism and not — as they should regard them — as indissolubly interwoven with its very fabric.

As for those highly important laws of Judaism, which strengthen us to do battle with the sensual lusts of appetite and passion, how little are they understood, how often denounced as cruel privation beyond the power of human nature to endure. The inner conception, the comprehension of Judaism, of the significance of its historic mission and teachings, is lacking, and therefore love for it has no soil upon which to grow. The champions of contemporary Reform sincerely desire the welfare of Israel, and if they have failed to recognize the good and have erred in their comprehension of the truth, it is not they who are chiefly to blame; the entire past bears the responsibility together with them. You should, therefore, respect their good intentions, but you may well weep and mourn when you examine the aims to which their efforts are directed.

To take a standpoint somewhere outside of Judaism, to accept a conception derived from strangers, of the purposes of human life, and the object of liberty, and then to cut, curtail and obliterate the tenets and ordinances of Judaism — is that the Reform we need? To remain within the fold of Judaism, but of a Judaism which is sadly misunderstood, and to confine one's efforts to the modification of the external form of a part of Judaism that is not properly understood, to remodel the Divine service in accordance with the demands of an age, to substitute for things mis-

understood and therefore abolished, other things that are equally uncomprehended — is that the Reform we desire? And as for the religious training of the young, which should be the bearer of all our hopes for the future, how does it fare? Our religious schools are like all the other institutions of learning of the present day. Our young are made thoroughly capable of contending vigorously in the struggle for a livelihood. The trades, commerce, the arts and sciences — all these are carefully inculcated and the mind developed, although even in this regard more attention is paid to the mere training of the memory than to the cultivation of habits of thought. But what about the education of the heart, the cultivation of Judaism — where is the school that is imbued with the Jewish spirit so that this spirit may also inspire the lives of its students? What about the rearing of human beings who will see themselves as creatures living in a Divine world and endowed with powers belonging to God which they are to dedicate to the fulfillment of God's will? Where are the young men and women who will rejoice in their mission and who will be imbued with fiery love for the name "Jew" which summons them to such a way of life, to fulfill the Divine Law amidst perils, sufferings and privations, who comprehend the world, the past, the present, and themselves as corner stones in the edifice of the future?

Take one of the religious textbooks in your hand and what will you find there? You may find some principle of life drawn from outside of Judaism, the thirteen creeds upon which Judaism may indeed stand, but which certainly is not all there is to Judaism. You may discover a few moral principles deduced from the Ten Commandments, with the

*Chukkim* and *Edoth* either entirely ignored or else mentioned only in passing, in the appendix, as the so-called "ceremonial law." It is all more or less the reflection of a catechism which originated upon quite a different soil and for entirely different purposes. Or we may find taught the merest mechanical knowledge of the Torah, sometimes not even that. As for the duties, they are merely taught for practice, in the most superficial manner, but without the slightest understanding or spiritual fervor, which would insure their comprehension and retention throughout life. Whence, in the name of Heaven, shall Jews then come, Jews who are inspired with the living spirit of the knowledge of God and their mission, and girded with strength to do battle against sensuality and error, against the troubles and the errors of the times?

But why dwell upon this gloomy picture? Let us rejoice that at least Israel's young are not inferior to others as regards intellect and morality, even though they are far removed from the ideals of Judaism. Let us rejoice at the activity going on within Judaism, even though much of it may be destruction or the white-washing of rotten parts.

It constitutes a pledge that better times are sure to come.



## *Eighteenth Letter*

**T**HE VERY ESSENCE OF ISRAEL'S BEING rests upon the Torah. In it is our basis and our goal, from it flows the vital fluid in our veins. If our relationship to the Torah is healthy and normal, then Israel can suffer no ill; if it is unhealthy, Israel cannot be well. There is no evil, no wrongful development in Judaism which does not owe its origin to the improper or sinful conception of the Torah. Our sages, with profound insight, point to this as the true cause of the first downfall of our nation, "*she-lo borchu ba-torah techillah*." — "they did not study the Law with the firm resolve to fulfill it in life and for life." Life, practical, everyday life, fled from the Law, and the Law could not therefore properly pervade life; it could not adequately enlighten it and inspire it with the Law's own genial warmth.

If you search for the cause of our modern sickness, you will find it nowhere else but in this fatal misconception and misapprehension. Originally only the fundamental teachings of Israel's law were set down in writing. This was the so-called *Torah she-bich'thav*, "the Written Law." But the broader application of this law, particularly its spirit, which is life itself, was to be preserved only in the living word, the "*Torah she-baal peh*," "The Oral Law." The oppression and affliction that accompanied Israel's dispersion threatened to destroy this traditional knowledge. The great and holy men who stood at the nation's head then decreed that the Mishnah be written down as far as its mere external word was conceived, but its spirit was still

left to the traditional exposition of the living word. Later, the exigencies of the times demanded more. Then they put the spirit of the Mishna into writing, in the form of the Gemarah, but the spirit of the Gemarah was still reserved for oral interpretation. But as time went on, further safeguards became necessary. Now the spirit of the Bible and the Gemarah was put down in the *Aggadoth*, the allegorical interpretations, but again disguised and veiled so that independent research should still be required to discover the true spirit of the traditional teachings thus perpetuated.

The Law and the spirit sought refuge in two academies, but passion and error soon sapped the foundations of these noble institutions and destroyed them. The Law went into exile, the letter and its external practical fulfillment were saved, but the spirit, preserved only in the symbolical concealment of the letter, disappeared. The spirit can be discerned only by deduction from the letter and from the symbol that veils it, and with the help of the higher insight which certain individuals had preserved. In those dark days there were, indeed, individuals who shone forth conspicuous through their true understanding of the spirit of Judaism, but they were the exceptions. Not all were endowed with such spiritual talents.

Israel's young, as a rule, trained their minds in non-Jewish schools, in independent, philosophic studies, and drew the concepts of Greek philosophy from Arabic sources. They learned to consider self-perfection through the knowledge of truth as the highest purpose of human existence. Their awakened minds felt themselves to be in contradiction to Judaism, whose spirit they did not understand. Their view of life was opposed to one which lays stress

upon action, and looks upon knowledge only as a means to such action. Then the age gave birth to a man,<sup>2</sup> a mind who, simultaneously brought up in the environment of uncomprehended Judaism and Arabic science, was compelled to reconcile in his own manner the conflict which raged within his own breast, and who, by proclaiming it to the world, became the guide of all in whom the same conflict existed.

To this great man, and to him alone, do we owe the preservation of practical Judaism down to our own day. Because he sought to reconcile Judaism with the difficulties which confronted it from without, instead of developing it creatively from within, he is responsible for all the good which blesses the heritage of Modern Judaism as well as for the evil which afflicts it. His own intellectual tendency was Arabic-Greek and so was his conception of the purpose of life. He entered into Judaism from without, bringing with him views of whose truth he had convinced himself from extraneous sources and he reconciled . . . For him, too, self-perfection through the knowledge of truth was the highest aim. The knowledge of God was the end and not the means. Hence he devoted his intellectual powers to speculations upon the essence of Deity, and sought to bind Judaism to the results of his speculative investigations as to postulates of science or faith. The *Mitzvoth* became for him merely guides, albeit necessary guides, to the attainment of knowledge and to guard against error, this latter often only the temporary and limited error of polytheism. Like the *Mitzvoth*, the *Mishpatim*, too, became merely rules of prudence; the *Chukkim* rules of health, a means of protection against the transitory errors of the time;

and the *Edoth*, ordinances, as having been designed to promote philosophical or other concepts. All this had no foundation in the eternal essence of things; it did not result from "their eternal demand upon me, or from my own eternal purpose and task;" it was not the eternal perpetuation of an unchangeable idea through symbols, and not inclusive enough to form a basis for the totality of the commandments.

In the last part of his philosophical work, he, the great systematic codifier of the practical results of the Talmud, gives expression to opinions concerning the meaning and purpose of the commandments which, taking the very practical results codified by himself as the contents of the commandments, are untenable, cast no real light upon them, and cannot serve as guides in practice, in life and in science. These are the views which have been inherited up to the present day by those who care at all to understand the spirit of the *Mitzvoth*. You see, instead of taking their stand within Judaism, and asking, "Inasmuch as Judaism makes these demands of us, what view must it have of the purpose of man?", instead of conceiving of each demand in its totality within the context of Bible and Talmud, and then asking, "What can be the reason and idea of this injunction?", people set up their standpoints outside of Judaism, and sought to draw Judaism over to their position. They conceived a *priori* opinions as to what the *Mitzvoth* might be, without troubling themselves as to the real nature of the *Mitzvoth* in all their ramifications. What was the consequence? The natural result of such a mode of thinking was that men who believed themselves the possessors of the knowledge which the com-

mandments had been designed to teach, thought themselves now absolved from the fulfillment of the commandments which were, after all, only guides to that knowledge. They deemed themselves exempt from the study of the science of the commandments, which had lost for them all intellectual significance.

Other men, possessed of a deeper conception of Judaism, became at first enemies of this philosophical spirit, and later, of all specifically intellectual and philosophical pursuits in general. Certain misunderstood utterances<sup>3</sup> were taken as weapons with which to repel all higher intellectual interpretation of the Talmud. No distinction was made between the question "What is stated here?" and the query "Why is it so stated?", and not even the category of *Edoth* which, according to its whole nature, was designed to stimulate the mind to activity, was excluded from the excommunication of the intellect. Another misunderstood passage (*Sanhedrin* 24 *Tosefot* "b'luloh") even led to the suppression of Bible study, an error against which almost prophetic warning had been given long ago (*Tractate Soferim* XV, 9). The inevitable consequence was, therefore, that since oppression and persecution had robbed Israel of every broad and natural view of the world and of life, and the Talmud had yielded about all the practical results for life of which it was capable, every mind that felt the desire for independent activity was obliged to forsake the paths of study and research open in general to the human intellect, and to take recourse in dialectic subtleties and hair-splittings.

During this entire period only a very few stood with their intellectual efforts entirely within Judaism, and built

it up out of its own inner concepts. Most distinguished among them are the author of the "Kuzari" and Nachmanides. This condition of uncomprehending Judaism became prevalent particularly in Germany, where ages of persecution and oppression suppressed every attempt at the free unfolding of the mind. However, the basic principle, God the All-One and the Torah His Will, and the fulfillment of the Law in the fear of the Lord and with love for, and faith in Him, retained its living force everywhere. Life, with all its possessions and pleasures, was offered up with magnificent devotion as a willing sacrifice to this principle. A form of learning came into existence which is an invaluable repository of the spirit of the Bible and Talmud, but which unfortunately has been misunderstood. What actually is eternal, progressive development was considered a static mechanism, and the inner significance and concept thereof as extra-mundane dream worlds. This method of study came into existence, and the mind turned either to the external ingenious development of the Talmud, or to this particular form of learning, which appealed to the emotions as well. Practical Judaism, which, comprehended in its purity, would perhaps have been impregnated with the spiritual, became in it, through misconception, a magical mechanism, a means of influencing or resisting theosophic worlds and anti-worlds.

Little by little there came into the hands of the people a part of a work,<sup>4</sup> originally intended only as a compendium for the learned and containing the last results of Talmudic legal science, codified for outward practice. It was essentially simply a differently arranged edition of the systematic work of Maimonides, by which the latter had become the

great preserver of practical Judaism in the days of the greatest oppression of exile. Unfortunately, however, it was almost exclusively one part of this work, containing only the divisions of *Edoth* and *Avodah*, referring to worship and holy days, that came into the hands of the people. The other parts, which deal with the other duties, were left for the learned, and did not become the possession of the people. Gradually the unfortunate opinion took hold that Judaism meant nothing but prayer and the observance of holy days. Its significance for life in general remained unrecognized.

Considering all these influences together, you will be able to comprehend the appearance which Judaism presented, say, in the middle of the eighteenth century. The subsequent events will also be intelligible to you. When the external yoke began to grow lighter, and the spirit felt freer, there arose again a brilliant personality who inspired great respect. This was Moses Mendelssohn who, by his commanding influence, has led the later development up to this very day. This commanding individual, who had not drawn his mental development from the wellsprings of Judaism, was great chiefly in philosophical disciplines, in metaphysics and aesthetics. He studied the Bible only from the philological and aesthetic point of view; he did not build up Judaism as a science from within itself, but merely defended it against political stupidity and pietistic Christian insinuations. Personally an observant Jew, Mendelssohn showed the world and his brethren that it was possible to be a strictly religious Jew and yet to shine forth as a German Plato.<sup>5</sup>

The words "and yet" were decisive. His followers con-

tented themselves with developing the study of the Bible in the philological-esthetical sense, with studying the *Moreh*, and yet pursuing and spreading the humanities. But Judaism, Bible and Talmud as part of Jewish education, were neglected. Even the most zealous study of the Bible was of no avail for the proper understanding of Judaism, because it was not treated as the authoritative source of doctrine and instruction, but only as a beautiful poetic storehouse from which to draw rich supplies for the imagination. With the Talmud thus neglected, and practical Judaism thus completely uncomprehended, it was but natural that the former symbolizing and abstract interpretation of Judaism, which had for a time been in the background, again became prevalent, and was carried to an extreme which threatened to destroy all of Judaism.

If that view of life, which places the highest mission of man in the recognition of truth, should be true, (and who could venture to doubt it, seeing that Maimonides has declared it to be so); if those views concerning the requirements of the Torah be true (and who could dare to think otherwise, since Maimonides, the great authority on the Talmud, had propounded them); then, indeed, the many folios of the Talmud are nothing but a wearisome mass of hair-splitting subtleties, useful only for the accumulation of dust and moths. Then, indeed, practical Judaism is nothing but unreasoning torture of the flesh. Who could resist this conclusion?

If, for instance, the sole purpose of the prohibition of labor on the Sabbath were to enable men to rest and recover from the toil of the week, if the Sabbath meant only the cessation of physical activity in order that the mind



may come into play (and who could doubt it, since both the Moseses interpret it thus and the Christian Sunday agrees with their conception), who, then, would not consider it mere pettiness and pedantic absurdity to fill an entire folio with the investigation of the question of what particular activities are forbidden, and what permitted on the Sabbath day? How strange to declare the writing of two letters, which may be an intellectual occupation, a deadly sin, while judging more leniently many acts involving great physical exertion or some activity of destruction! And then to forbid even the hen to lay eggs! Or, to go over to another domain, if sacrifice means only to give of one's possessions in grateful recognition of the fact that they come from God, or if, in its specific parts it was mainly designed as a protest against the then prevalent polytheistic sacrificial customs; how absurd is it, then, to fill three or four folios with investigations concerning the manner of offering sacrifice, which parts thereof may be used, the persons who may officiate, and the times at which they can be offered! Do you not see that all of this, then, would be nothing but soul-killing priestcraft? Therefore many conclusions could be, and were, drawn, but before drawing them, people should have asked themselves, "Is Moses the son of Maimon, or Moses the son of Mendel, really identical with Moses the son of Amram?" Is there not contained in this dissonance between the theory of the *Mitzvah* and its reality a proof that the explanation is not right, that it is not based upon the complete conception of the *Mitzvah*, but is simply dreamed into it from without?

Does not the *Moreh* itself say that, in formulating the concept of the *Mitvoth* it uses only the Written Law as

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a basis, a standpoint which Maimonides himself would have declared incorrect for practical purposes, and which cannot, therefore, be considered anything but irrational.

Does Maimonides himself not say that, in considering the significance of the *Mitzvoth*, he has not taken into account those details which, only if taken in their totality, will give the complete idea of the *Mitzvoth*, and which form the main subjects of discussion in the Oral Law? (*Moreh Nebuchim*, Chapters 26 and 41). There must be sense in all the commandments, in particular as regards those which declare themselves as being instructive, which call themselves "testimony," "memorial" and "symbol." It must be possible to find the spirit inherent in them. This attempt was never made. Moreover, many did not wish to make the attempt, or to attain to the result. For a spirit had come from the West which mocked at everything holy, and knew no greater pleasure than to make them sound ridiculous. Together with it there entered a longing for sensual enjoyment, which eagerly embraced the opportunity to rid itself so easily of burdensome restrictions. These motives combined to induce people to tear down the barriers erected by the Law, until human conduct became one dead, dull level.<sup>6</sup>

And what is our present state? Today, two opposing parties confront each other. The one party has inherited uncomprehended Judaism as a mechanical habit, *mitzvoth anashim melumodoh* without its spirit. They bear it in their hands as a sacred relic, as a revered mummy, and fear to awaken its spirit. Some of the others are indeed filled with noble enthusiasm for the welfare of the Jews, but they look upon Judaism as a lifeless framework, as

something which should be interred in the grave of a past long since dead and buried. They seek its spirit and find it not, and are in danger, with all their efforts to help the Jew, of severing the last life-nerve of Judaism out of sheer ignorance. And today, when, despite a thousand shades and variations of difference, these two opposing elements are alike in the one great respect, that they are both in the wrong — what shall be done? What is the way to salvation? Does it suffice for the salvation of Judaism to establish our schools upon such a two-fold basis, and to reform our mode of worship? The spirit, the inner harmonious principle of life, is lacking, and that you cannot supply by polishing the outer frame.

There is one way to salvation — atonement must begin where the sin was committed. That one way is to forget the inherited views and prejudices concerning Judaism; to go back to the true sources of Judaism, to the Bible, Talmud and Midrash; to read, study and comprehend them in order to live by them; to draw from them the teachings of Judaism concerning God, the world, mankind and Israel, according to history and precept; to know Judaism out of itself; to learn from its own utterances its wisdom of life. The beginning should be made with the Bible. Its language should first be understood, and then, out of the spirit of the language, the spirit of the speakers therein should be inferred. The Bible should not be studied as an interesting object of philological or antiquarian research, or as a basis for theories of taste, or for amusement. It should be studied as the foundation of a new science. Nature should be contemplated with the spirit of David; history should be perceived with the ear of an

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Isaiah, and then, with the eye thus aroused, with the ear thus opened, the doctrine of God, world, man, Israel and Torah should be drawn from the Bible, and should become an idea, or system of ideas, fully comprehended. It is in this spirit that the Talmud should be studied. We should search in the Halachah only for further elucidation and amplification of those ideas we already know from the Bible, and in the Aggadah only for the figuratively disguised manifestation of the same spirit.

This is the path you should pursue, unconcerned as to the opinion which others may hold in reference to your methods of study. You are studying in order to know the light, the truth, the warmth and the sublimity of life, and when you have attained this end you will understand Israel's history and Israel's Law, and that life, in its true sense, is the reflection of that Law, permeated with that spirit. One spirit lives in all, from the construction of the Holy Tongue to the construction of the universe and the plan of life; one spirit, the spirit of the All-One!

Ah, what a task for the disciples of science! But the results of such study must be carried over into life, transplanted by the schools. Schools for Jews! The young saplings of your people should be reared as Jews, trained to become sons and daughters of Judaism, as you have recognized and understood and learned to respect and love it as the law of your life. They should be as familiar with the language of the Bible as they are with the language of the country in which they live. They should be taught to think in both. Their hearts should be taught to feel, their minds to think. The Scriptures should be their book of law for life, and they should be able to understand life through the word of that Law.

Their eye should be open to recognize the world around them as God's world and themselves in God's world as His servants. Their ear should be open to perceive in history the narrative of the education of all men for this service. The wise precepts of the Torah and Talmud should be made clear to them as designed to spiritualize their lives for such sublime service to God. They should be taught to understand, to respect and to love them, in order that they may rejoice in the name of "Jew" despite all which that name implies of scorn and hardship. Together with this type of instruction they should be trained for breadwinning, but they should be taught that breadwinning is only a means for living, but not the purpose of life, and that the value of life is not to be judged according to rank, wealth, or brilliance, but solely in terms of the amount of good and of service to God with which that life is filled. They should be taught not to subordinate the demands of their spiritual mission to those of physical pleasure and comfort, but the reverse. While this training goes on, and until such time as Israel's house will be built up of such sons and daughters, the parents should be implored and entreated not to interfere with the work of the school, not to crush tender shoots of Jewish sentiment in the breasts of their children with a cold unsympathetic attitude. The school should also endeavor to awaken within the hearts of the parents the nobler impulses latent there. If this should prove impossible, at least they should be brought to respect the sentiments which they cannot themselves understand. If an earnest effort were made to attain these ends, things would be different in Israel.

And things will become different in Israel! Our time

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inevitably leads to such a change. Do not think our time so dark and hopeless, my friend; it is only nervous and uncertain, like the hours of labor of a woman in childbirth. But better the anxiety which prevails in the house of a woman about to give birth, than the freedom from anxiety, but also from joy and hope, in the house of the barren one. This time of labor may well outlast our lives and the lives of our children and grandchildren. But our later posterity will rejoice in the infant that will have struggled out into light and life. And the name of that child will be "a Judaism which properly understands itself."

The age offers one pledge that this will indeed come to pass: it is the effort to think, to comprehend and to grasp that which should be respected and revered.

"What does it mean that I am a Jew? What is Judaism?" The seekers for the answer will go back to the ancient sources of Judaism, the Bible and the Talmud, and their one effort will be to obtain an understanding of life out of Judaism, and to understand Judaism as the law of life. This endeavor will lead to the transposing of that which holds the theory of truth and life into actual, practical truth and life, *lil'mod ul'lamed lishmor velaasoth*, "to learn and to teach, to keep and to do."

You who mean well with Judaism which you have inherited as a habit and which you intend to hand down as a habit — o, that your eyes might be opened and that you would recognize that you can hand it down only through the spirit. O, that you might at least hand to your sons and daughters the Scriptures, the writings of the Torah, the Prophets and the Hagiographa, so that the spirit which throbs in these holy books might become their light and support in life.

Light and truth and life will emerge from these days of trial. Be sure of that, and you will regard differently that which I, too, was wont to deplore with you, the apparently chaotic state of the spiritual affairs of our people. There is no authority; all efforts are solely individual. Through the lust for reform, the religious service, about which the whole movement turns, has become so variegated that a Jew travelling through Germany might almost find it different in every congregation. Do you not see that this lack of authority also may have its good? I am convinced that none of us now living understand Judaism in its true purity and genuine truth. Consider also the divergency of opinions, quite natural inasmuch as almost every Rabbi strikes out his own path and is led by no schools. Consider, furthermore, that we are living only at the time of travail. It would be unfortunate if an authority tried to establish something—it would only make our troubles eternal.

Under the present circumstances, I rejoice that the scales hang free, held by God alone, and that only intellectual efforts mutually balance each other, but that no temporal power can interpose the sword to check the freedom of the swinging.

Let the scales swing! The freer they hang, and the more violently they now swing up and down, the truer and purer will be the estimate of the right principle of faith and life which they will determine in the end. And when the scales have ceased to swing, the spirit which understands itself, its history and its law will have pervaded all the members of Israel. When the branch gone forth from Israel shall have accomplished its mission and fought

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to victory a battle of another kind in the midst of our non-Jewish brethren; when the free gaze uplifted to the All-One, and the awareness of inner moral power shall have conquered whatever dims the eye and corrupts noble vigor — then the book of history, with its conclusive lesson, will also penetrate the spirits of all men . . .

Let us understand the time in which we live, dear Benjamin, and let every one of us, according to the measure of intellectual and spiritual power given him, strive to further the progress to the goal, each in the great or small sphere in which he lives. Thousands may forsake the cause of life and light, thousands may tear themselves away from the lot and the name of Israel, whose mode of life they rejected long ago — the cause of truth does not count the number of its adherents. Even if only one should remain — one single Jew with the Book of the Law in his hand, with Israel's law in his heart, Israel's light in his spirit — that one suffices; Israel's cause will not be lost. When Israel had grown unfit for its mission, the All-One desired to permit the Law and the Mission of Israel to be carried through by the one Moses, and if we should falter, the prophet calls out to us the same truth:

*"Gaze upon the rock from which you were hewn,  
Upon the fountain-hollowing mallet with which you  
carved!*

*Look upon Abraham, your father,  
Upon Sarah, who was destined to bear you.  
Only one was he when I called him;  
I blessed him and made him many."*

(Isaiah 51:1-2)

Farewell, dear Benjamin. Train yourself to be such a man. Farewell.



## *Nineteenth Letter*

### ESSAYS

**Y**OU HAVE PREVAILED, DEAR BENJAMIN! On the day when you consecrate unto yourself the wife with whom you are to erect a home in Israel, I shall offer you the only present you seek. I shall grant the request which you have so often uttered to me. If God gives me understanding and health, I shall lay upon my people's altar the only offering which, in my limited powers, I am able to place there. I do not entertain in connection with it the sanguine hopes with which you have welcomed this resolve. I have revealed to you in writing and orally what I have cherished for a long time as my most precious treasure, and you have accepted it with warm appreciation as the truth. But I do not imagine on that account that it will be acknowledged by all as the truth, or that I may with any certainty deem it to be the pure coin of truth. I know too well both my own limitations and the character of the age in which I live to be led astray by such roseate hopes. But, in times of such serious import, and in behalf of a cause which to most of us is the most sacred, I consider it the duty of everyone to make known his views openly and honestly.

The accompanying roll of essays concerning Israel's duties<sup>1</sup> should convince you that I have long since devoted my thoughts to this task. But I have been, and still am, diffident, not on account of myself, but because of the cause which I have ventured to represent.

In an age when contrasts stand so sharply over against

each other, and when truth is on neither side, in such an age the man who belongs to no party, who has only the cause in his heart, and serves it alone, cannot expect universal approval or concurrence, unless he is a master who comprehends the Divine truth in all its purity.

This I knew, and I know it still, and it was with this knowledge that I first took up the pen to write these essays. Fame or acknowledgment of my personal merit are not the objects which I seek, or else they whose judgment already sounds in my ears as that of the masses, would indeed be right if they would say, "He understands but little the world and his time, and what it demands." No such motive has prompted me to these efforts, but only the inner voice which ever speaks to me the same words, "There is some truth in your views, some of that truth which must ultimately struggle forth into the light of victory. The way upon which you have begun to walk is perhaps only a by-path, but it leads in the right direction, and if one abler than you should begin to pursue it, the cause of truth would surely prevail." This voice alone stirred me on.

Surely, my friend, is not one grain of truth worth the sacrifice of my own person, even if I should have to sacrifice it a thousand times over? This consideration has never made me hesitate, but other concerns have filled me with anxiety, when I asked myself whether I would not do harm where I intended to help. The view of the reconstruction of Judaism as a science I have evolved almost solely out of my inner consciousness. Only one dear friend assisted me a little in the smaller, easier and clearer part of the task, and only one star guided me somewhat in the begin-

ning. I have worked myself through to the point where you now find me.

But may it not be that I have entered into a thousand devious paths, and accepted a thousand errors as truths? Is the edifice, as it stands within me, and as I would show it to my brethren, free from defects? And if the attempt should fail, would not my critics make use of my unsuccessful attempts as a means of strangling the cause we hold dear. How they would gloat over my failure and say, "Just see, some new attempts to rehabilitate Judaism — and such complete failures." I was not born to be a writer. All my life I have thought more than spoken, and spoken more frequently than written. Will I be able to write for truth with the clarity which convinces minds and the power which captures hearts? If I would speak to the children of the present time, I must address them in a modern language and a modern style. And as surely as I know that Judaism, if properly understood and properly presented, unites all living things with a band of love and justice, so surely do I know also that malicious calumniators can and do take isolated passages, torn out of their context, interpreted in contradiction to their true spirit, and use them as pointed arrows and ponderous cudgels with which to smite and wound helpless victims. Will my efforts meet with a better fate? Will not some one whose sensitive spirit has been insulted and offended by rude audacity, be able to point to me as the cause — albeit the innocent cause? Such considerations, and many others of a similar kind, oppressed me.

"How did you resolve all these doubts," I hear you ask, "since, after all, you did decide to undertake the work?"

## THE NINETEEN LETTERS

It was because I have climbed alone to a height, from which a new vista spreads out before me. On that very account it devolves on me to summon companions, to descend, and to begin the journey with the friends who will join me. I only wish to give them what I have been able to gather together until now, not as a perfect work, but truly as "essays."

Then there is the question of duty. I see a child enveloped in flames. The bystanders are timidly inactive, or seek only to save the building. I see the child, and I rush in. Need I ask first my neighbor whether he, too, sees the child? Have I the right to consider whether, in my hasty rush, I may not injure some neighbor? May I even ask whether, in my haste to save the child, I am not hindering the task of saving the building, or whether I am producing a draft which may start the fire to fresh activity? "But suppose you see the child too late, and before you reach it, the building crashes down upon its head?" Even if it should bury me, too, in its ruins, I would only have done my duty.

Of course, my dear Benjamin, the natural way would have been to have labored first only for the scientific evolvment. Whatever would have proven its truth and tenability would then have been quietly transferred into the practice of everyday life. That would have been the quieter, the surer, more pleasant way.

But our time demands that we take a different course. In the days of Mendelssohn, when the new movement of the spirit had begun, but everyday Jewish life was yet untouched, it would have been possible to construct the science of Judaism and to bring to the strong Jewish life then

everywhere prevailing the light and warmth of the spirit. This is no longer possible today. The opinions which are not derived from true Judaism have become active and vigorous, and labor with vicious energy to undermine that which they pretend to represent. They must be combatted directly in the midst of life, so that the many who still observe may understand that which they keep, that many who now reject may come to stop and examine that which they cast off. Later on, it would devolve upon the men of science to establish, in a scientific manner, and as a science, the principles which we actively defended in daily life.

This is the way in which I intend to proceed. If Heaven will grant me health and understanding, I shall endeavor to set down in the first part<sup>2</sup> the views of Judaism concerning God, the world, man, Israel and the Torah. In the second part, I shall expound the *Mitzvoth*, as far as it is incumbent upon us to fulfill them, now that we are deprived of soil and nation. The passages of the Torah shall always take precedence. Then will follow the views which I have acquired as the result of several years of study. Finally, for the purpose of practical fulfillment, there will follow excerpts from the four-part code of the Shulchan Aruch. Everything will be treated in a popular vein, directly for life. Its scientific demonstration will be left as a task for later on, even as you now have this part in your hands.

I rejoice that the first impulse to write these essays was derived from the necessity of supplying the teachers of the schools under my supervision with a book in which they could first read themselves into becoming true Jews before they would begin to rear young souls for Judaism. In

elaborating upon these essays for broader circles of readers, I have always thought of the thinking young men and women of my people as their principal readers. It is this second part that I intend to publish first, God willing. Certainly, you are right in your description of the plan, when you say that the knowledge of the general should precede that of the specific, and such is, indeed, the plan of my work. Nevertheless I shall publish the specific first. I know well that I will thereby stir up more opponents, for people are readier to acknowledge principles before they have obtained a full view of the consequences to which they logically lead. Still, I cannot do otherwise.

I recognize as our most immediate and fundamental evil the false opinions and notions which prevail concerning the extent as well as the contents and meaning of our *Mitzvoth*. In these isolated, uncomprehended tasks and duties, Israel's essence is misunderstood, attacked, annihilated. It is here that the first effort should be made to repair the breach. When the demonstration has been given as to the specific contents of Judaism, then the gaze may be lifted higher and the question be answered as to the position which Judaism, as a whole, occupies in the series of other phenomena. What is its relationship to mankind? What is the position of man in the world as conceived by Judaism? And what is the relation of the world to God and of God to the world? Were the first part to appear first people would look upon that which I say of Israel as a mere dream picture, a creation of a fertile imagination and nowhere existing in reality. In order to give my readers as much knowledge of the general as is absolutely necessary for the understanding of the specific, I shall first sketch

some general outlines, such as I tried to give you in the beginning of our correspondence.

So much for this project in which you take such a warm interest. May you, if its results are not to be altogether without some benefit, remember with joy that, at a time when your eye might have been centered with so many sweet hopes entirely upon your own personal life, you had so much love for things general and universal. May the day on which you receive these lines be for you the beginning of a joyful, active future. May the wife whom you today call "consecrated unto me," be consecrated to you forever as your most sacred possession. May the home which you establish together be pure and holy and godly, even as the holy symbol of the *tallith* with which you enwrap yourselves. May the "cup of life" from which you both shall drink together hold ever so much of the sweet that you shall never despair, and so much of the bitter that you shall never grow over-proud. And may you accept all the abundance of blessings only as means given you by the hand of God to live a life of righteousness and love. Farewell, dear Benjamin.

Yours,

NAPHTALI

## NOTES

### *First Letter*

1. *Orach Chaim*

### *Second Letter*

1. Bible
2. Talmud

### *Third Letter*

1. A play on the Hebrew term *eretz*, from *rotz*, "to run"
2. Ethics of the Fathers 5:1

### *Fourth Letter*

1. Gen. 1:27 and 2
2. Treatise Niddah, Page 16 B
3. *Gomol* is "to ripen"

### *Ninth Letter*

1. The Hebrew word for "stripe" is *chavurah* and not *chaburah*

### *Tenth Letter*

1. Biblical ordinances
2. Rabbinical ordinances
3. It is customary to divide the *Mitzvoth* into *mitzvoth asseh* and *mitzvoth lo ta-asseh*, commands and prohibitions, but this is not essential for our purpose, for the same command may be, from one point of view, positive, and negative when seen from another. e.g. *lo ta-ashok* and *beyomo titen sechoro*, or *tochal matzoth* and *lo ye-ochel chometz*

### *Eleventh Letter*

1. Exod. 20:2
2. Exod. 20:3, Lev. 19:26, Deut. 4:39, 6:4 and 18:13
3. Deut. 4:19, 20
4. Deut. 4:9, 5:19
5. Deut. 8:2
6. 4:40, 6:12, 13, 16, 7:9
7. Lev. 11:44, 20:7, Deut. 10:12-16
8. Deut. 5:18, 8:11
9. Lev. 19:18, Deut. 15:1
10. Exod. 20:13, Deut. 25:1, 27:24, *Yoreh Deah*, *Choshen Mishpat*
11. Exod. 22:1, Lev. 5:21, 19:11, 13, Deut. 24:14, *Choshen Mishpat*
12. Exod. 22:6, 9, 13, Lev. 25:15, *Choshen Mishpat*
13. Lev. 19:35, Deut. 25:13, *Choshen Mishpat*
14. Exod. 21:18, 33, 35, 22:4, 5, Deut. 22:8, *Choshen Mishpat*



15. Exod. 23:7, Lev. 19:11, *Choshen Mishpat, Eben ha-Ezer*
16. Exod. 22:30, Lev. 19:17, 34, 25:17, *Choshen Mishpat*
17. Lev. 19:16, Num. 17:5
18. Lev. 19:14, Deut. 13:12, 27:18, *Orach Chaim, Choshen Mishpat, Yoreh Deah*
19. Exod. 20:16, 23:1, 6, 8, Lev. 19:15, Deut. 1:16, *Choshen Mishpat*
20. Lev. 22:24, Deut. 20:19, *Hilchei Melochim*, 18, 16 to *Yoreh Deah*, Shabbat, fol. 67:2, *Eban Ha-Ezer*
21. Exod. 23:19, Lev. 19:19, Deut. 22:9-11, *Yoreh Deah*
22. Lev. 22:28, Deut. 22:6, *Yoreh Deah*
23. Exod. 23:5, Deut. 25:4, *Orach Chaim, Choshen Mishpat*
24. Deut. 21:22, *Yoreh Deah*
25. Gen. 9:5, Lev. 19:28, Deut. 4:9, 14:1, *Yoreh Deah, Choshen Mishpat*
26. Lev. 18:4-24, Deut. 22:22-23, 23:10, *Yoreh Deah, Eben-ha-Ezer*
27. Exod. 22:30, 34:26, Lev. 3:17, 7:23, Chap. 11, 20:25, Deut. 12:21, 23, 14:20, 21 *Yoreh Deah*, 1:9,4
28. Lev. 19:27, 23:10, Num. 31:21, Deut. 22:5 *Yoreh Deah, Orach Chaim*

#### *Twelfth Letter*

1. Deut. 6:14, 13:5, 28:9
2. Exod. 20:12, Lev. 19:3, Deut. 5:16, 27:16, *Yoreh Deah*
3. Lev. 19:32, *Yoreh Deah*
4. Deut. 4:5, 5:1, 6:6, 30:11, *Yoreh Deah*
5. Deut. 13:5, 8
6. Lev. 5:5, 20, 11:44, Chap. 16, 20:7, 26:39, Num. 5:5, Deut. 30:1 *Orach Chaim*
7. and 8. Gen. 1:28, Deut. 7:3, 24:1, 25:5, *Yoreh Deah, Eban ha-Ezer*
9. Lev. 6:1, 19:16, Deut. 22:1, *Choshen Mishpat*
10. Exod. 22:24, 23:5, Lev. 25:35, Deut. 17:10, 22:4, 23:21, 24:6, 17, *Yoreh Deah, Choshen Mishpat*
11. Exod. 23:5, *Choshen Mishpat, Orach Chaim*
12. Lev. 19:17, 18, 34 Deut. 6:18, 23:8, 28:9, 15, 33:4, *Yoreh Deah, Choshen Mishpat*
13. Deut. 31:19, *Orach Chaim, Yoreh Deah*
14. Exod. 18:21, *Orach Chaim, Yoreh Deah, Choshen Mishpat*
15. Jeremiah 29:5
16. Leviticus 22:31, *Yoreh Deah, Choshen Mishpat*

#### *Thirteenth Letter*

1. In giving this sketchy and superficial account of the *Mitzvoth* (commandments) and particularly in regard to the *Edoth* and *Avodah* (symbolic practices and worship), I must presuppose that the *mitzvot* are, in general, known to you from your study of the Bible and Talmud, or from their practical application in life. It is not my purpose to describe the *mitzvot* themselves. You will find difficulty

in harmonizing some of them with the concepts given here. My intention is only to state the concepts under which I arrange them in my own mind, merely as a sort of label upon the receptacles, in which they are contained, in order to arouse in you the desire to become more thoroughly acquainted with their contents, and also to give you data to settle for yourself the question, "Is this really the concept at the basis of the *mitzvah*?"

#### Fourteenth Letter

1. *Kelayoth* and *haktarath kavod*
2. *Haktarath chalev*
3. *Zerikath dam*
4. *Ketoreth*
5. *Olah*
6. *Olah*
7. *Asham* and *Chatath*
8. *Shelamim* and *Todah*

#### Fifteenth Letter

1. Tannith 11 and 22
2. *Segulah* means a property belonging exclusively to one owner, to which none other has any right or claim. Compare *Baba Kamah* 87
3. *Chassidei umoth ha-olam yesh lahem chelek le-olam habo*, is a saying of the sages which may be interpreted as meaning that all the nations will help to work out the historical destiny of humanity.

#### Sixteenth Letter

1. This letter is explained through the circumstances that at the time of its writing the emancipation of the Jews, though everywhere proposed and discussed, was not yet an accomplished fact in most European states. It is remarkable with what accuracy Hirsch comprehended the nature of his brethren and how literally his apprehensions of a misunderstanding of the purpose of emancipation by a great section of the Jewish people have been fulfilled.

(The Translator B.D.)

#### Eighteenth Letter

1. *Sura* and *Pumbeditha*
2. *Maimonides*
3. For instance, *Bereshith Rabbah Lech Lecha* 44 *Torah Kohanim Acharei Moth* 19 the injunction not to *darshinon ta'amo d'hro* which was often held up to me, has no other than the very proper meaning that we should not attach any importance in practical decision to the conjectural reason of a *mitzvah*, because it is only conjecture. See also Nachmanides, Commentary to the Torah, *Kedoshim* 19:19.
4. *Shulchan Aruch*
5. Do not misunderstand me. I speak here only of the total impression

of his work for Judaism. His "Jerusalem" which defends, on Jewish grounds, freedom of thought and religion, emphasizes also, in contradiction to the *Moreh*, the practical essence of Judaism. It gives utterance to an opinion concerning the *Edoth* which, had it been carried out and intellectually comprehended by his successors, might have given the subsequent period quite a different character. But neither the one thing nor the other took place. The science of Judaism was not further developed by him, and his successors, lacking the religious sentiment of their teacher, did not rest content under the idea of the eternally binding power of the Divine revelation, and could do nothing better for the intellectual comprehension of the Law than to surrender completely to the Maimonidean theories.

6. One word here concerning the proper method of Torah investigation. Two revelations are open before us; that is, nature and the Torah. In nature all phenomena stand before us as indisputable facts, and we can only endeavor *a posteriori* to ascertain the law of each and the connection of all. Abstract demonstration of the truth, or, rather, the probability of theoretic explanations of the facts of nature, is an unnatural proceeding. The right method is to verify our assumptions by the known facts, and the highest attainable degree of certainty is to be able to say, "The facts agree with our assumption" — that is, all the phenomena observed can be explained according to our theory. A single contradictory phenomenon will make our theory untenable. We must, therefore, acquire all the knowledge possible concerning the object of our investigation, and know it, if possible, in its totality. If, however, all efforts should fail in disclosing the inner law and connection of phenomena revealed to us as facts in nature, the facts remain, nevertheless, undeniable, and cannot be reasoned away. The same principles must be applied to the investigation of the Torah. In the Torah, even as in nature, God is the ultimate cause. In the Torah, even as in nature, no fact may be denied, even though the reason and the connection may not be understood. What is true in nature is true also in the Torah; the traces of Divine wisdom must ever be sought for. Its ordinances must be accepted in their entirety as undeniable phenomena, and must be studied in accordance with their connection to each other, and the subject to which they relate. Our conjectures must be tested by their precepts, and our highest certainty here also can only be that everything stands in harmony with our theory. In nature, the phenomena are recognized as facts, though their cause and relationship to each other may not be understood, and are independent of our investigation. So, too, the ordinances of the Torah must be law for us, even if we do not comprehend the reason and the purpose of a single one. Our fulfillment of the commandments must not depend

upon our investigations. Only the commandments belonging to the category of *Edoth*, which are designed to impress emotional and intellectual life, are incomplete without such research.

*Nineteenth Letter*

1. Here the author alludes to his subsequent work "Horeb"
2. Of "Horeb"